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MARGERY DAW.

A NOVEL.

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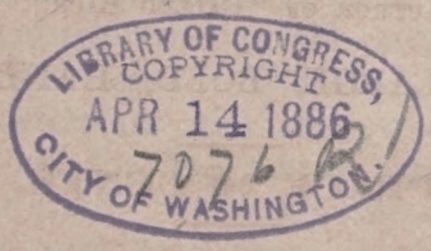

NEW YORK:
GEORGE MUNRO, PUBLISHER,
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1886

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MARGERY DAW.

CHAPTER I.

"STAND back there! Move aside! Good heavens! Can't you see the woman will die if you press about her in this way?"

The speaker bent over the lifeless form as he uttered these words, and tried once more to pour a little stimulant between the pallid lips. The scene was one of indescribable confusion. A collision had occurred between the Chesterham express and a goods train, just a short distance from Chesterham Junction. Five of the carriages were wrecked. Fortunately three were empty; and the other two contained only three passengers—a man, who, with his arm bound up, was already starting to walk to the town; a boy, badly cut about the head, leaning pale and faint on a portion of the broken wood-work; and, lastly, a woman, who lay motionless on the bank, a thick shawl spread between her and the cold damp earth. On discovery she had been removed from the *débris*, laid on the bank, and forgotten in the excitement and terror. The rest of the passengers had sustained only a severe shaking and bruises; and loud were their grumblings and expressions of self-sympathy as they clustered together on the bank, shivering in the gray autumn mist. A doctor who had been summoned from Chesterham ran his eye over the assembled people, strapped up the boy's head, and skillfully set the broken arm of the man. It was while doing this that his glance fell on the prostrate form lying on the grass; and the sight of the pale bloodless face immediately brought a frown to his brow.

"What is the matter there?" he asked a passing porter.

"Lady in a faint, sir."

The doctor fastened the last bandage, and with hurried

steps approached the woman. A crowd followed him, and gathered round so closely as to cause him to request them to "stand back." His words produced the desired effect, and the by-standers moved away and watched with breathless interest his fruitless efforts to restore animation.

The frown darkened on the doctor's brow; there was something more than an ordinary faint here. He raised the woman's head for another trial, and the mass of red-gold hair already loosened fell in glorious waves round the beautiful pale face, bringing a murmur of admiration from the beholders. The sudden action caused one limp cold hand to fall against the doctor's warm one, and at the contact he shuddered. He raised the heavily fringed eyelids, gave one look, then gently laid the woman's head down again, and reverently covered her face with his handkerchief.

"I can do nothing," he said tersely, as if speaking to himself; "she is dead!"

The crowd drew back involuntarily; some hid their faces, while others gazed at the slight form in its dark-brown dress as if they doubted the truth of his statement. Suddenly, while the doctor stood thoughtfully drawing on his gloves, one of the porters appeared in the crowd. He held a child in his arms—such a pretty child—with hair that matched the red-gold masses of the lifeless form on the bank, eyes that shone like sapphire stars from beneath her curling lashes, and a skin of cream white, with no warmth of color in the face save that of the small red lips. She was dressed in a little gray coat, all covered now with dust; in her tiny hands she clasped a piece of broken wood-work, holding it as though it were a treasure, and she glanced round at the by-standers with an air of childish piquancy and assurance.

"Whose child is this?" inquired the porter, looking from one to another.

There was a pause; no one spoke, no one owned her. The porter's honest face grew troubled.

"Where does she come from?" asked the doctor quickly.

"We have just picked her from under the roof of a second-class carriage," the porter explained. "We were turning it over—you see, sir, it fell some distance from the rest of the carriage—and when we lifted it we found this mite a-singing to herself and nursing her dolly, as she calls this

piece of wood. It's by Heaven's mercy she ain't been smashed to bits; but she ain't got not even a bruise. She must belong to some one,'' he added, looking round again.

A lady in the crowd here stepped forward.

"Give her to me," she said kindly. "Perhaps she was traveling alone; if so, that will be explained no doubt by a letter or something."

But the child clung to the porter, her pretty brows puckered, her red lips quivering.

"Mammie!" she cried, plaintively. "I wants my mammie!"

The doctor turned and looked at the child and at that instant she suddenly wriggled and twisted herself from the porter's arms to the ground, and, running to the silent form lying on the bank, crouched down and clutched a bit of the brown dress in her hands.

"Mammie,'' she said, confidently, looking round with her great blue eyes on the circle of faces, all of which expressed horror, pity, and sadness—"Mardie's mammie!''

The doctor stooped, drew back the handkerchief, and glanced from the living to the dead.

"Yes," he said, abruptly; "this is her mother. Heaven have mercy on her, poor little soul!"

The lady who had come forward went up to the child, her eyes filled with tears. She loosened the dress from the small fingers.

"Mardie must be good," she said, tenderly, "and not wake her mammie. Mammie has gone to sleep.''

The child looked at the still form, the covered face.

"Mammie peep,'' she repeated; "Mardie no peak, mammie—be good," and she lowered her voice to a whisper and repeated, "be good." She suffered herself to be lifted in the kind, motherly arms, and pressed her bit of wood closer to her, humming in a low voice.

"We must find out who she is," the doctor said, his eyes wandering again and again to the dead woman. "She must be carried to the town; there will be an inquest."

A passenger at this moment pointed to some vehicles coming toward them. They could not drive close to the spot, as a plowed field stretched between the railway and the road, and one by one the group dispersed, all stopping to pat the child's face and speak to her. The doctor gave some orders to the porter who had found the child, and a

litter, formed of a broken carriage-door, was hastily improvised. As the crowd withdrew, he knelt down by the dead woman and with reverent hands searched in the pockets for some clew. He drew out a purse, shabby and small, and opening this, found only a few shillings and a railway ticket, a second-class return from Euston to Chesterham. In an inner recess of the purse there was a folded paper, which disclosed a curl of ruddy gold hair when opened, and on which was written—"Baby Margery's hair, August 19th."

The doctor carefully replaced it. A key and a tiny old-fashioned worthless locket were the remainder of the contents. He checked a little sigh as he closed the purse, and then proceeded to search further. A pocket-handkerchief with the letter "M." in one corner, and a pair of dogskin gloves, worn and neatly mended, were the next objects, and one letter, which—after replacing the gloves and handkerchief—he opened hurriedly. The lady, still holding the child in her arms, watched him anxiously. The envelope, which was already broken, was addressed to "M. care of Post-Office, Newtown, Middlesex." The doctor unfolded the note. It ran as follows:

"Mrs. Huntley will engage 'M.' if proper references are forwarded. Mrs. Huntley would require 'M.' to begin her duties as maid, should her references prove satisfactory, as soon as possible. 'M.'s' statement that she speaks French and German fluently has influenced Mrs. Huntley to reconsider the question of salary. She will now give 'M.' twenty-five pounds per annum, for which sum 'M.' must undertake to converse daily with Mr. Huntley's daughter in French and German, in addition to her duties as maid. Mrs. Huntley desires that 'M.' will send her real name by return of post.

"Upton Manor, Nr. Liddlefield, Yorkshire.

"Nov. 15th, 18—."

The doctor handed the note to the lady, who read it through quickly.

"That does not give much information," he observed, rising from his knees.

"Dated yesterday—received this morning. We must telegraph to this Mrs. Huntley; who knows?—the poor

creature may have sent her references, with her full name, before starting from London."

"Yes, you are right; we must do that. But what is to become of the child? Are you staying here for long, madame?"

"No," replied the lady; "I had intended to travel straight on to the North. But I shall remain in Chesterham for the night, and continue my journey to-morrow. I wish I could delay it longer; but unfortunately my son is ill in Edinburgh, and I must get to him as soon as possible. However, I will take care of this poor little mite to-night. I hope by the morning we shall have discovered her friends and relations."

"If you will do that," said the doctor, "I will see to the mother. I must have the body carried to the infirmary."

He beckoned as he spoke to the porter, who was standing at a little distance talking to the crowd of navvies who has arrived to clear the line, and the dead woman was lifted on to the litter, and covered with a rug belonging to the lady who had taken charge of the child. She watched the proceedings with a feeling of unspeakable sadness, and, as the melancholy burden was carried toward one of the cabs, she clasped the child closer to her breast, and tears stole down her cheeks.

The baby, cooing to her strange doll, looked up as they moved across the field. She put up one little hand and rubbed away a tear from the motherly face.

"No kye," she said, in her pretty lisping fashion. "Mardie dood—she no kye."

The lady kissed the small lips.

"Mardie is a sweet angel," she whispered; "and now she shall come with me to a pretty place and have some nice dinner."

"Din, din," said the child, nodding her head with its wealth of red-gold curls. "Mardie 'ungry. Mammie a din-din, too?"

The lady shivered.

"Yes, mammie will go to a pretty place too," she answered hurriedly.

When they reached the cab, the doctor came up to them.

"If you will allow me to suggest, The Plow is the best hotel. I would come with you, but I must drive straight

to the infirmary. Give me the child for a moment while you get in. She has lost her hat, poor little thing; but the town is not far off, and the best place for her will be in bed."

Mardie went willingly to the doctor's arms. She prattled to him about the "din-din" and "mammie," but much was unintelligible to him. She did not ask for her mother or seem strange. "Mammie a peep," she asserted several times in a whisper; and she was content with the two kind beings whose hearts were heavy with pain as they thought of the long dreary path she must tread henceforth without a touch from the loving hands or a word from the tender voice she knew so well.

"There, madame," and the doctor placed the small gray-clad form in the cab. This poor little mite can not thank you herself; but, if you will allow me in humanity's name to offer you gratitude—"

The lady stopped him.

"I have done no more than my duty. I thank you, sir, for your courtesy. Will you kindly let me know as early as possible the results of your telegram? I will go to The Plow; my name is Graham."

"And mine Scott. I will certainly let you know the instant I receive any intelligence. Something must be done with this child; but that is for to-morrow's consideration. She is safe in your hands for to-night."

Dr. Scott raised his hat, and the cab started along the country lane toward Chesterham. Mrs. Graham drew Mardie on to her knee, and tried to chat to the child; but her whole nervous system was so shattered by the events of the past hour that the effort was vain.

Chesterham was a large manufacturing town. The news of the collision had spread rapidly, and, although the November dusk was closing in, crowds were thronging to the scene of the disaster. Mrs. Graham leaned back in a corner to escape the eager eyes, for she knew the story of the young mother's death would be known by now, and her natural refinement and delicacy shrunk from vulgar curiosity and hysterical excitement. The cab soon rattled into Chesterham, and, after a short journey through the lamp-lighted streets, stopped before the door of The Plow. Mardie was handed out to a pretty-faced chamber-maid, whose bright cap-ribbon immediately claimed the child's atten-

tion, and Mrs. Graham followed slowly and wearily up the stairs, feeling her strength go at every step. The babyish voice and shrill peals of laughter echoed in her ears as the wail of future grief; her eyes were fixed on the small form, but her thoughts were with the dead young mother.

She dismissed the maid when she reached her room, and, drawing Mardie to her, began to loosen the gray coat, which bore traces of dainty design beneath the dust and dirt. For the first time the child seemed to feel her loss.

"Mammie undress Mardie," she said, putting up one little hand. "Mammie peep now, but wake soon."

"Mammie would like Mardie to take off her coat like a good girl," Mrs. Graham replied, feeling instinctively that the youthful mind grasped already the meaning of love and duty.

The child dropped her hand and nodded her head, then submitted to have the coat removed. She was neatly dressed in a dark-red cashmere frock, made loose like a blouse; she wore a tiny thread of gold round her neck with a little heart-shaped pendant suspended. Mrs. Graham took it in her hand, eagerly hoping to find some clew; but, on turning it, her eyes rested on a miniature of the mother's lovely face.

"Mardie's mammie," exclaimed the child, taking it and kissing it—"dear mammie!"—then, with infantile changeableness, she rushed with a little shriek to the door where a kitten had just appeared, and with great delight picked up the downy little creature and caressed it.

The advent of dinner soon attracted her attention, and she prattled away merrily in her baby-language while the dishes were carried in. Mrs. Graham forced herself to talk to the child, and tried to divert her mind from its gloomy thoughts by devoting herself to the task of tending the little one. She was not a young woman, and the events of the day had proved almost too much for her nervous system; but with true unselfishness she tried to forget her own troubles in ministering to the tiny atom of humanity thrown so cruelly upon the world's ocean, with mayhap no haven or port of love and affection to look to.

She lifted Mardie on to a chair, and was about to give her some food, when the door opened, and, looking up in surprise, she saw a lady, young and handsome, attired in a riding-habit, enter the room.

CHAPTER II.

"I MUST apologize for this intrusion," began the stranger, as she closed the door; "but my errand I trust will excuse me."

"What may I do for you?" asked Mrs. Graham, rising.

"Let me introduce myself," said the young lady, with a pretty smile. "I am Lady Coningham, wife of Sir Hubert Coningham of the Weald, Hurstley, a village about three miles out."

Mrs. Graham bowed.

"I heard of the terrible accident while returning from a long run, and I rode over immediately to make inquiries. I have learned everything." She stopped for an instant, and then asked, "Is that the child?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Graham briefly.

"Poor thing!" murmured Lady Coningham involuntarily. She moved forward and bent over the child, stroking back the rich golden-red curls. "Poor wee thing! How pretty she is!"

Mardie smiled and showed her pearly teeth as she rapped her spoon impatiently on the table.

"Din-din," she cried eagerly—"Mardie so 'ungry!"

Lady Coningham stood by while Mrs. Graham prepared the child's meal. She said nothing, but two tears rolled down her cheeks and fell upon her well-gloved hand. As soon as the child was well started, she turned and motioned Mrs. Graham to the fire-place.

"Can you tell me anything about her?" she asked quickly.

Mrs. Graham shook her head.

"We have no idea," she answered; then she spoke of the letter and the doctor's intention of telegraphing to Mrs. Huntley.

"Yes—yes, that will be best. My object in coming here, Mrs. Graham, was to speak about the child. I met Doctor Scott, who told me briefly of the mother's death and your kindness; and I hurried here to see what I could do. Sir Hubert is one of the magistrates; therefore, as his wife, I consider it my duty to take up the case. Perhaps

my efforts will not be required for long—I sincerely hope not—it will be a sad lookout for this baby if we can not find her friends."

"It is the merest chance," Mrs. Graham observed. "This lady in Yorkshire may have received the name and references. I earnestly trust she has."

"If not, we must consider what to do with her," said Lady Coningham. "I would give everything I possess to be able to carry her home with me; but"—she sighed a little—"that is out of the question."

"You have children?" inquired Mrs. Graham gently, attracted by the other's sweet expression.

"No," Lady Coningham answered slowly. "I had one once, but—but it is gone." She bent to kiss Mardie's soft little cheek as she spoke, and again tears welled into her eyes.

"I am glad you have come," said Mrs. Graham, after a pause, "for it would have gone to my heart to leave the child without some kind hand to minister to it occasionally. I must go North to-morrow; but I feel now that, should the worst happen and we find no clew, you will care for this poor little flower."

"I will do all in my power for her," returned the younger woman; "but do not let me keep you from your dinner—indeed you must want it."

Mrs. Graham rose and seated herself at the table. She felt weak and faint, but eating was almost an impossibility. Mardie, her food finished, put her hands together and whispered a grace, then wriggled down from her chair and went to the fire.

"She must go to bed," said Mrs. Graham, rising again and ringing the bell; "she is growing tired now."

The words were quickly verified, for the little head suddenly began to droop, and the beautiful eyes to grow misty and sleepy: but, as Lady Coningham, who had hurriedly removed her gloves, knelt and began to unbutton her frock, the little child pushed her away and looked round with a sudden quick feeling of fear and strangeness.

"Where Mardie's mammie—where a mammie?" she murmured.

"Mammie is asleep," said Mrs. Graham soothingly, dreading a fit of terror.

"Mammie peep? Mardie want a mammie. Mammie come a Mardie, come a Mardie!"

She ran to the door of the room and tried to reach the handle. Lady Coningham picked her up.

"If Mardie will be a very good little girl, she shall have some goodies — such pretty goodies. See—here comes Mardie's bath! She is going to be such a clean little girl."

Mardie sat still, but her small hands were clasped together, and her little chest heaved with sobs. Then, as the bath was put before the fire, and, looking from one to the other, she could see nowhere the sweet tender face that had smiled on her every day of her young recollection, she burst into a tempest of tears, and, struggling from Lady Coningham's hold, ran wildly round the room in a paroxysm of fear, calling for her "mammie."

For several minutes their coaxing tenderness was in vain; but after awhile the maid succeeded in attracting her attention with a gaudily painted sugar parrot, which she had purchased at a confectioner's shop near by. The tears were all spent, nothing but sobs remained, and the parrot came as a welcome bright spot in her small world of grief.

"Pitty—pitty," she murmured, clasping it to her breast and hugging it. Then she grew so sleepy that she was scarcely conscious of their hands removing her clothes, and her head drooped like a tired flower as they put on a night-gown borrowed from the landlady. She needed no lullaby to coax her to slumber now, and was lost in dreamland as the maid carried her gently into the bedroom.

Lady Coningham stood and gazed, as if held by some magnetic power, at the tiny face pressing the pillow, at the clusters of red-gold curls falling in such rich profusion around it. She was lost in the memory of the brief joy that had come to her only two short years before, and lived once again in the unspeakable happiness of motherhood.

The sound of a deep voice broke her musings, and, stealing softly from the bed, she entered the sitting-room and gave her hand to Dr. Scott.

"What news?" she asked hurriedly.

Dr. Scott handed her a telegram, then seated himself by the table, leaning his head on his hand.

Lady Coningham hastily read the words—

"From Mrs. Huntley, Upton Manor, Liddlefield, to Doctor Scott, Chesterham,—am distressed to hear of accident and the poor woman's death. I can give you no information, as I have received no reply to my last letter to 'M.' Pray let me know if I can be of any pecuniary assistance."

Lady Coningham put down the paper quietly.

"What is to be done now?" she asked.

"I have telegraphed to Newtown," replied Dr. Scott, looking up, "to the post-office there, but, as yet, have received no reply. They may know something, but I can not help thinking the poor creature had some reason for secrecy, and I am doubtful as to success."

Mrs. Graham was reclining wearily in an arm-chair by the fire. She spoke now as the doctor finished.

"I wish from my heart I could take the child, but it is out of the question, at any rate just now. My son is studying at Edinburgh University; he unfortunately caught a severe cold, and is now prostrate with rheumatic fever. My every moment will be with him; but, if you will place the poor mite with some kind people for a time, Lady Coningham, I will add my share to the expense, though frankly I am not by any means wealthy."

"I know of a person," began the doctor; but Lady Coningham broke in eagerly—

"I will take her to Hurstley. There is a poor young woman, the wife of one of my gardeners, almost heart-broken through the death of her baby. Her cottage is not far from the Weald. I pass it every day in my rides, and I could see the child very often. Let her come there to-morrow before you start. I will see Mrs. Morris to-night as I go home."

"That seems an excellent plan," agreed the elder woman—"at all events, for a time; but we must leave no stone unturned to find her relations."

"Will Sir Hubert like the arrangement, your ladyship?" asked Dr. Scott, as he rose to depart.

Lady Coningham's face flushed slightly.

"I will make it all right," she replied, though with a little constraint. "Fortunately, Morris is a favorite with him. But now I must go; it is very late, and I have a long ride. Lest we should not meet again before you

start, Mrs. Graham, let me say now how pleased I am to have made your acquaintance, though the introduction has been a sad one. I will let you know early in the morning, Dr. Scott, if I have succeeded; and may I ask you to send the child over?"

The doctor bowed, and opened the door.

"I will come down and assist you to mount. Your groom is with you, I trust?"

"Oh, yes!" Lady Coningham smiled another farewell to Mrs. Graham, and was passing out, when a thought struck her. "Suppose," she said hurriedly, "suppose I can not do this, what will become of the child?"

"She must go to the work-house," replied Dr. Scott gloomily; "my hands are too full already, as your ladyship knows, and there is no other alternative."

Lady Coningham could not repress a shudder.

"That must never be," she said decidedly. "I must arrange with Morris. Many thanks. Good-bye!"

Mrs. Graham rose early the next morning. Her sleep had been troubled and restless; but the child had never moved, and still slept on placidly as she dressed herself quietly. Dr. Scott was announced about half past eight, and his face showed that he had gained no further information.

"The post-office can give me no clew," he said. "They recollect the woman 'M.,' and describe her accurately; but she received no letters save three addressed to her initial; consequently we are just where we were. Lady Coningham has sent her groom to say that Mrs. Morris will receive the child, so when she is dressed I had better take her over there myself."

Mrs. Graham assented with a sigh, and then rang for the maid to assist her in preparing Margery for the journey. The little one was very good; she submitted to her bath in brightness, and only now and then would turn her head to look for her mother. Already she seemed to know Mrs. Graham, and raised her lips many times to be kissed, her childish affection sending a pang of pain through the woman's heart. At last all was ready; the little gray coat, well brushed and repaired, was donned, a silk handkerchief tied over the red gold curls, and the beloved parrot clutched in a tight embrace. Mrs. Graham knelt for one brief moment by the small form, and a silent prayer

went up to Heaven for mercy and protection; then she led the child to the doctor.

"I will write from Edinburgh," she said hurriedly; "perhaps, after all, I shall be able to manage something in the future; and here"—handing two sovereigns to the doctor—"is my small share toward present expenses. When will the inquest be?"

"To-day," returned Dr. Scott, picking Margery up in his arms.

"And she will be buried where?" again asked Mrs. Graham quickly.

"It must be a pauper's funeral," he answered sadly; "any other would cost too much."

"Can we not get up a subscription? The railway company should give something. It seems so dreadful that she should be buried in a pauper's grave, with no stone above her."

"I will do my best to prevent it," Dr. Scott said kindly. "Your suggestion about the railway is good, and I will communicate with the directors to-day. Whatever happens in the future, you, madame, have acted nobly, and this child owes you a debt of gratitude."

"Ah, I wish I could keep her with me always!" Mrs. Graham responded, kissing the little cheek once more. "I must say good-bye now. I will write to you in a day or two. Will you let me know if any news reaches you, and where you bury the poor mother?"

"I will," answered the doctor; then he turned away and carried the child, still happy and unconscious of her terrible loss, down the stairs, to his trap; and, taking the reins, he drove rapidly through the town to the village of Hurstley.

CHAPTER III.

"STUART, where are you going?"

The question was put in a cold sharp voice, and came from a lady sitting at her writing-desk in a spacious window-recess overlooking extensive grounds. She was a handsome woman, with rather massive features and a profusion of dark-brown hair artistically arranged. Her eyes, of a light green-gray shade, were fixed at this moment on

a young man standing in an easy graceful attitude outside the French window.

"Going, mother?" he responded. "Nowhere in particular. Do you want me?"

Mrs. Crosbie examined her firm white hands for one brief second.

"Have you forgotten what to-day is?" she asked quietly.

The young man pondered, puckered his handsome brows, and pretended to be lost in doubt.

"I really forget," he answered, after awhile, looking up with a mischievous twinkle in his brown eyes. "Thursday, I believe; but you have your almanac close to your hand, mother."

"This is Thursday, the 22d of July, Stuart," observed Mrs. Crosbie, putting down her pen and looking fixedly at her son. "And this afternoon your Aunt Clara and Cousin Vane will arrive, and you are expected to meet them at Chesterham Station."

"By Jove," exclaimed Stuart, with a soft whistle, "I had clean forgotten them!" He pushed his hands into his tennis-coat pockets and regarded his shoes with almost a real pucker on his brow. "What time are they due?" he asked, after a brief silence.

Mrs. Crosbie took up a letter and read aloud:

"'We shall arrive at Chesterham by the 12 express from Euston, reaching the junction about 6:30. Pray let somebody meet us.'"

"I call that cool," observed the young man shortly. "But I suppose Aunt Clara can not do a thing for herself. However, it need not entail my going; she only says 'somebody,' and I am nobody."

"Your father will expect his sister to be treated with respect," was his mother's icy reply.

"And I trust he will not be disappointed," responded Stuart; "but to trudge to Chesterham in this heat will be enough to roast a fellow."

"I have ordered the barouche," Mrs. Crosbie told him. "Vane must lean back comfortably—she is so delicate."

Stuart Crosbie buried his toe in the well-kept lawn and made no answer to this. His mother watched him keenly, though he was unaware of her scrutiny.

"Well?" she said at last.

"Well?" he replied, looking up.

"Stuart, I do not often express my wishes, but to-day I particularly desire you should go to Chesterham and meet your aunt and cousin."

Stuart removed his felt tennis-hat and bowed low.

"My lady-mother," he said lightly, "your wishes shall be obeyed."

He put on his hat and strolled away, while a frown settled on his mother's face. She tapped her writing-table with her pen, in evident vexation; but after awhile her brow cleared, as if some new thought had come into her mind and by its bright magic dispelled the cloud.

Stuart Crosbie sauntered on over the lawn. A moment before he had grumbled at a prospective walk in the heat when the day would be declining, yet now he made no haste to get out of the sun's rays, although trees whose spreading branches promised shade and coolness studded his path. He had pushed his hat well over his eyes, and with his hands still in his pockets dawdled on, as if with no settled purpose in his mind.

He had strolled in a circuitous route, for, after progressing in this fashion for some time, he looked up and found himself almost opposite to the window—though at a distance—from which he had started. His mother's head was clearly discernible bent over her writing, and, waking suddenly from his dreams, he left the lawn, betook himself to a path, and made for a gate at the end. The lodge-keeper's wife was seated at her door, having brought her work into the air for coolness. She rose hurriedly as she perceived the young squire striding down the path, and opened the gate.

"Why did you trouble, Mrs. Clark?" said Mr. Crosbie courteously. "I could have managed that myself."

"Law sakes, Master Stuart, my good man would be main angry if he thought I'd let you do such a thing!"

"Jim must be taught manners," Stuart laughed lightly. "How do you like this weather?"

Mrs. Clark mopped her brow with her apron.

"It's fair killing, sir," she answered; "I never remind me of such a summer. But folks is never content. Mayhap what tries me is good for others—your young lady

cousin for one, sir. Mrs. Martha tells me she is very weakly like. She be coming to-day."

"I have vivid recollections of Vane as a child," Stuart remarked, more to himself than to the woman: "and certainly I can testify to her strength then, for she boxed my ears soundly."

"Laws, Master Stuart!" ejaculated Mrs. Clark. "What a little vixen!"

"But these are tales out of school," laughed the young man; "and I fancy I tormented her pretty freely in those days. Ta-ta, Mrs. Clark! Go back and have a nap—sleep is the best way to pass these hot days."

"Now, if he ain't the best and kind-heartedest boy in the whole world!" mused Mrs. Clark, watching him as he strode along the lane. "Just like his father, poor gentleman!"

Mr. Crosbie went along the road at a fast pace, and did not slacken his speed till he sighted a few cottages that denoted a village. Then he moderated his pace, and sauntered into the one street, hot and parched with thirst.

"Phew!" he exclaimed to himself, taking off his hat and waving it to and fro vigorously. "I must have something to drink. I wonder if Judy keeps soda-water?"

"Judy" was the owner of a small shop, the one window of which displayed a heterogeneous mass of articles—comestibles, wearing apparel, tops, and scissors. It did not look very inviting, but thirst must be quenched, and better things might be in store behind the counter. So Stuart raised the latch and entered the cottage.

"Soda-water, Master Stuart?" repeated Mrs. Judy, in amazement. "I scarce count on what you mean. There's pump-water, if you like, or may be a glass of milk."

Mr. Crosbie hesitated for a moment, then decided for the latter.

"It is a long time since I drank so innocent a beverage, Judy," he observed, putting down the glass with a slight shudder.

"Ay, there ain't much 'arm in milk," responded Judy. "But, laws, Master Stuart, you do look warm! Will you 'ave a chair and set in the door-way to cool a bit? There's a little bit of wind springing up."

Mr. Crosbie shook his head.

"No, thanks, Judy; I must get on. There"—throw-

ing a shilling upon the small counter—"take that for your kindness."

"Eh, but, Master Stuart, I'd like you for a customer every day!" exclaimed the woman; aad with a smile and a nod Mr. Crosbie strode away.

He passed through the narrow street, deserted now—for the sound of the children's voices was wafted from the village school—and turned into a wide country-lane that led to the left of the cottages. After sauntering a few yards, he came in sight of a wood inclosed by a high wall, while through the branches of the trees glimpses of a gray-stone house were visible. Mr. Crosbie's steps grew slower and slower as he approached this wall, and he walked past it in a very desultory fashion. Presently he reached a large iron gate through which a wide even drive was seen. Evidently Mr. Crosbie had no acquaintance with this drive, for he passed on, still down-hill, till he came to a tiny spring trickling and babbling by the side of the road; and here he paused. He was out of the sun's glare now, and felt almost cool; to his right hand stretched the path he had just traversed, to his left lay two lanes, one leading through the distant fields, the other turning abruptly. He thought for an instant, then turned in the direction of the latter, and just before him stood three cottages at equal distances from each other. He passed the first, and with a quick nervous hand unlatched the gate of the second, and went up the sweet-smelling garden.

The door was ajar, and as he knocked a faint weak voice answered—

"Come in."

Stuart Crosbie pushed open the door and entered the cottage. A woman was lying on a sofa, propped up with pillows the whiteness of which rivaled her face in purity. She had a woolen shawl round her shoulders, although the heat was so oppressive, and looked very ill.

Stuart bent over her.

"How are you to-day, Mrs. Morris?" he asked gently.

"Much about the same, thank you, Mr. Stuart. Were you wanting Reuben, sir?"

"Yes. I did rather want to see him," replied the young man a little hesitatingly. "I am anxious to hear about that poaching affair the other night."

"It weren't nothing at all, sir," Mrs. Morris said, in

her low weak voice. "Reuben was out nigh most of the night, but couldn't see a soul."

"Well, I'm glad of it," observed Mr. Crosbie warmly, "for between ourselves, Mrs. Morris, I confess my sympathies go entirely with the poachers."

Mrs. Morris smiled faintly.

"Ah, you ain't Sir Hubert, sir! He don't hold them views. You would give the whole village welcome to the birds; but he's different."

"Yes, we are rather opposed in some ways," remarked the young squire dryly. "Is it true, Mrs. Morris, that Sir Hubert and Lady Coningham are coming home?"

"Yes, sir; Mrs. Brown the housekeeper come to see me yesterday, and she says her ladyship is expected next week. Ah, I am glad I shall see her again! I began to fear I should die before she came back."

"You must cheer up," said Stuart gently, "and not talk about dying. Why are you here all alone? Where is Margery?"

"She've gone out, sir. She would go all the way to Farmer Bright's to fetch me some fresh eggs; our hens are bad at laying just now. But she ought to be in directly, sir. She started at dinner-time, and it's now close on three o'clock."

"It's a long walk to Bright's farm," observed Mr. Crosbie, rising and strolling to the window, and stooping apparently to sniff the bowl of flowers standing on the ledge, but in reality to have a good look down the hot dusty lane.

"Ay, it is, sir; but Margery would go. She takes such count on me, sir; and it's her lesson-day and all."

"Is she still studying with the rector's governess?"

"Yes, sir; her ladyship, when she wrote last, desired her to continue the lessons, and Miss Lawson speaks main well of Margery's cleverness. I expect Lady Coningham won't know her when she sees her again."

"Ten years would make a difference, Mrs. Morris," Stuart said, looking round with a smile; "and Margery was only about seven when Lady Coningham went to India. What a jolly little thing she was too! We had some fun in those days."

"Margery is a bit of a tom-boy now," the sick woman observed, with a loving light in her eyes.

"Is she? Well, I never see it; she always seems as sedate as—well, as the rector's governess herself. But I must be off. Tell Reuben I looked in to hear about the poachers, and that I don't sympathize with him a bit for spending the night in the wood." He bent and took one of the invalid's thin white hands in his. "And now don't get low-spirited about yourself, Mrs. Morris; you will feel better when this heat passes. I shall send you some fruit down from the castle. I dare say you can manage a few grapes."

"Many, many thanks, Mr. Stuart, and Heaven bless you, sir! You are very good to me."

Tears rolled down Mrs. Morris's pale face, and the young squire turned away with a sudden expression of sorrow. At the door he hesitated for a minute, then said hurriedly—

"I shall walk a little way along Linton's Lane, Mrs. Morris. I want to ask Margery about Bright's crops."

"Ay, do, sir," replied the sick woman warmly; "she will be rare glad to see you."

Mr. Crosbie strode down the path, and let the gate swing behind him. He turned to the right, and walked quickly along in the glaring heat, with his eyes fixed in an almost eager way on the long straight road before him. Away in the distance appeared an object—a patch of something pink moving very slowly toward him. His pace increased, the distance lessened between this object and himself, and gradually the pink patch melted into the slender form of a girl, her bent head covered with a flapping white sun-bonnet, a small basket on her right arm, and a book between her two little brown hands. She came on very slowly; apparently the heat had no effect on her, although the sun was beating on her with scorching force. Mr. Crosbie slackened his pace as they drew nearer, and at last came to a stand-still. The girl was so deeply absorbed in her book that she was unaware of his presence till, looking up suddenly, she saw him just in front of her. The book dropped, a flush of color mantled her clear transparent face, and a look of intense pleasure shone in her great blue eyes.

"Mr. Stuart! Oh, how you startled me!"

"Did I, Margery?" returned Stuart, removing his felt hat and grasping her hand firmly. "What are you made of? You must be a salamander to live in this heat; yet here you are walking along as if it were in Iceland; and

you look as cool as"—hesitating for a simile—"as a cucumber."

"Oh, I don't mind a little sunshine!" said the girl, with a slightly contemptuous curl of her short upper lip. "In fact, I don't feel it. But where are you going, Mr. Stuart? Have you seen mother?"

"Yes," replied the young man, turning beside her and taking the basket from her arm. "She told me you had gone to Bright's farm, and I am anxious to know how his crops are."

"He is grumbling of course," Margery answered; "but I fancy he is on the whole well satisfied."

Their eyes met, and they both burst into a merry fit of laughter.

"You don't care a bit about the crops—you know you don't!" remarked Margery severely, as she tried to banish the merriment from the corners of her mouth.

"Well, strictly between ourselves, I don't. It is a fearful confession for a farm-owner to make, but it is the truth."

"Ah, I am glad you do tell the truth sometimes!" said the girl, with a bright glance from her glorious eyes.

"You must be a witch or some sort of fairy," Stuart declared suddenly, "for prevarication, let alone untruths, always fails when I meet you."

He was watching her with intense earnestness, enjoying the sweet witchery of her beauty. For she was beautiful; her form was so slender and lithe; every limb, from the tiny feet in the rough country shoes which could not hide their daintiness, to the small delicately shaped hands, browned and tanned as they were, spoke of grace and loveliness. Her head had a certain imperious carriage that made the simple cotton gown appear a queenly robe, and the face beneath the flapping sun-bonnet was one to inthrall a sterner man that Stuart Crosbie. The complexion of pale cream white which even the sun could not kiss to a warmer shade, the sweet rosy mouth, the great wondrous eyes fringed with long dark lashes, and the mass of ruddy golden curls that twined about the brow and delicate throat were but a few of the attractions that Margery possessed. One of her greatest charms was the simplicity and unaffectedness of her manner; perhaps it was that as yet none had whispered flattery in her shell-like ear, none had tried to

sweep away her girlish frankness and youthfulness by adulation and undue admiration. But Margery never seemed to think she possessed beauty, nor even that that beauty was such as a queen might sigh for. She found more pleasure in tossing the hay, romping with the children, or, in quieter moods, diving into her books, than in posing before her mirror; and she was quite unconscious of the exact meaning of Stuart Crosbie's eyes, which filled with a fire of admiration and ecstasy whenever they rested on her.

"Now," she said lightly, turning her book round and round in her hands after they had been conversing for several minutes, "since I am a fairy, I shall get this question answered. Why did Mr. Stuart take such a long walk in the broiling sun which does affect him if he does not care a scrap about Farmer Bright's crops?"

"Why?" echoed the young man. "Why, to meet you, Margery!"

"Oh, how kind of you!" she returned quietly; then, looking up with a smile, she added, "Come now—I shall begin to doubt my power. What—"

"But that is the real downright honest truth. I told Mrs. Morris it was to ask about the crops, but I tell you the truth."

"And why could you not tell mother the truth," she asked quickly—"why not say you wanted to see me? She would have been honored at such a thought."

Stuart Crosbie bit his lip. His brow clouded for a second, then he answered quietly:

"Yes, you are quite right, Margery. I ought to have said so. Well, never mind—I will next time. And now tell me what you have been doing all this age. What is that book?"

"'The Mill on the Floss'"—holding it out.

"Hum! Looks dry—is it?"

"Dry!" exclaimed Margery. "Oh, it is so beautiful! Have you never read it?"

"I hardly think so," confessed the young squire. "I will look it out in the library when I get back, and dig into it to-night, when I am smoking."

"Miss Lawson doesn't approve of story-books," said Margery; "but I am not so strict."

"And how are you getting on?"

"Oh, all right! I am deep in German just now. I speak French every day when I go to the rectory. I want to be perfect by the time her ladyship comes back. Mother has told me all about her kindness to me. I can scarcely remember her when she went away, but she must be nice."

"Nice!" exclaimed Mr. Crosbie. "She is a brick—a million times too good for that old curmudgeon Sir Hubert!"

"No one seems to like him," Margery remarked thoughtfully—her face had grown almost sad; "but mother is never tired of telling me all about Lady Coningham—how she took me when I was a baby, and my poor dear real mother was killed, and put me with mother Morris. I am not very old, Mr. Stuart, but I feel I can never repay her ladyship all she has done for me. Sometimes I seem to have a faint misty recollection of the days when I first came here, and I can see a face that was—oh, so pretty and kind!"

"My mother always says Catherine Coningham was very beautiful," Stuart said, as the girl paused. "I remember her as a faded pale woman, very kind, as you say."

"There is one thing she did I can never, never forget," Margery went on—"that was her goodness in burying my poor mother in such a pretty spot, and putting that cross on her grave. It does me good to go there, Mr. Stuart. I almost think my mother knows I go. She must have been sweet, she was so beautiful! I always wear my locket, you know"—she put up her hand and produced a tiny heart of gold—"it is such a comfort. I wonder who I really am!"

"I think you are a princess," observed the young man gravely; "you look it."

Margery shook her head.

"We shall never know, I suppose," she said sadly, "and I shall always be the nursery rhyme girl 'Margery Daw,' as Lady Coningham christened me."

"It is the prettiest name in the whole world!" cried Stuart warmly. "And—and it suits you!"

"So you would say if you caught sight of me on the village see-saw;" and Margery laughed heartily. Then she added. "But we are home; and you have carried my basket all the way. It must be nearly four o'clock."

"No!" he exclaimed incredulously. "By Jove, I shall have to tear—" Then he stopped abruptly and asked, "Margery, when are we going to have that picnic we decided on a month ago?"

"Oh, some day!" she answered, going into the garden and closing the gate.

"But 'some day' is so vague. Shall we fix it for next Wednesday? That is your half-holiday, I know."

His eyes were fixed on her face with such earnestness that for the first time she seemed to feel their power. She colored faintly and held out her hand.

"Yes, Wednesday, if you like—if mother is well enough to spare me. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" he answered.

He gave one last look, and then hurried up the hill. He had a good hour's walk before him, his toilet to make, and the drive to Chesterham to accomplish as well. That Lady Charteris and her daughter Vane would be received at the station by the young squire of Crosbie Castle seemed very improbable indeed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE dressing-gong sounded sonorously through the corridor of Crosbie Castle. In one of the many charming rooms situated in the towering wing a young girl was standing. The open windows overlooked a sweep of verdant lawn, majestic groups of veteran trees, and to the left a clump of smaller wood-growth, touched with every tint of green. From beneath, the scent of many a flower was borne on the air and wafted to her, bringing with its fragrance a sense of purity and delicacy that was utterly wanting to the faint odors that hung round the costly glass bottles her maid was placing on the toilet-table.

The mistress of the dainty apartment was leaning against the open window deep in thought. She was tall and slight, with a face of delicate loveliness and charm, albeit spoiled a little by a slight expression of indifference and discontent. She had hair of the warm brown shade peculiar to Englishwomen; her eyes were large, of a clear but rather cold blue; her mouth was small and well shaped, disclosing white even teeth when her lips parted. There was an

easy graceful nonchalance about her carriage; and, without being a strictly beautiful figure, Vane Charteris had an indescribable air of *hauteur* in the slope of her shoulders and well-poised head that put to shame many a rival better favored by nature. Her eyes were fixed at this instant on the figure of a young man walking quickly across the lawn to the house, followed by half a dozen dogs. He was by no means unpleasant to look upon; and so thought his cousin, for she watched him with evident attention and interest.

"My squire of Crosbie pleases me," she murmured, moving languidly from the window; "for once mamma has shown discrimination with worldly wisdom."

She seated herself at the glass, and let her maid unpin her luxuriant tresses till they fell upon the folds of her pink silk wrapper in glorious profusion. Vane Charteris had been out two years. Worshiped from her cradle by her weak widowed mother, she had entered society's world haughty, indifferent, and selfish. The admiration she received was but a continuation of the adulation that had been lavished upon her all through her life; she had no aims, no hopes, no ambitions, but was content with her imperious beauty and the power that gift brought. At first Vane was a great success—her proud coldness was new, and therefore, a delightful experience; but after awhile society grew weary of her automatic ways. The season just ended had been a lesson to her. She saw herself deserted, and her power slip from her; and, as this truth came home, she woke suddenly from her dreams, and realized that something more was expected of her if she would still reign as queen.

Lady Charteris little guessed the workings of her daughter's mind. She had grown to consider Vane as a priceless jewel which must be carefully watched, carefully tended and thought for. She judged the girl's nature to be one of the highest, combining true Charteris pride with utter indolence. Possibly the mother had felt a touch of vexation when she saw girls far below her child in beauty wed nobly and well; but she loved Vane as her life, and regret was banished in the pleasure of her presence.

This was the first visit of the beautiful Miss Charteris to Crosbie Castle. Hitherto she had contented herself with meeting her uncle and aunt in London; but this year the

mood seized her to accept their oft-repeated invitation and spend a few weeks in their country home. She had heard much of her Cousin Stuart, but had never seen him since her childhood, as during the past two years he had been traveling, and before that time she never left the seclusion of her school-room.

Sore with the knowledge of her social failure, dissatisfied with her mother, herself, and everybody, Vane had sunk into a morbid depressed state. She left town without a sigh (though, when she contrasted this journey with her migration of the former season, she might have given vent to one, for instead of hearty farewells and expressions of regret, she was neglected, save by her maid and her mother), and actually felt a thrill of genuine pleasure as she bowled through the country lanes and drank in the sweetness of the air. She stole many hurried glances at her cousin during the drive—Mr. Crosbie had reached the station in the nick of time—and found herself agreeing with the oft-repeated praises her mother had sung concerning him. There was a manliness, a frankness, an absence of self-consciousness and conceit about Stuart Crosbie that pleased her jaded spirit; he was as handsome as any of her former admirers, while possessing many other advantages they did not. She listened quite interestedly to his chatty accounts of his travels, and was surprised at the pleasure she derived from them.

"What will mademoiselle wear?" the maid asked, after she had coiled and waved the luxuriant hair round the graceful head.

Vane woke from her musings.

"Oh, anything, Marie; it does not matter! No; on second thoughts, give me that plain white silk."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

Marie went to the inner room, and returned with a mass of soft rich clinging drapery on her arm, and assisted her mistress to adjust the robe in silence. She was wondering a little why mademoiselle should have chosen so simple a gown—it was not her usual habit. But, when the last touch was given, and Vane stood gazing at her reflection in the mirror, the maid was fain to confess the choice was good. The tall supple form looked inexpressibly graceful in the long soft folds, the delicate masses of lace brought fichu-like across the bust gave a touch of quaintness to the

whole, and the purity of the silk gave a softened, fresher look to the pretty face, for once free from its discontent. Vane looked long at herself, then turned to her maid:

"My gloves and fan, Marie. Thanks. Do not trouble to wait for me to-night. Leave my wrapper here; I will brush my hair myself. I dare say you are tired."

"*Merci bien, mademoiselle,*" Marie murmured, marveling still more. She was unaccustomed to any notice, to say naught of kindly words from her young mistress.

Vane drew on her long white gloves, then went slowly through the corridor and down the stairs. The sun was declining, the heat of the day dying, and a faint delicious breeze came in through the many open windows. Miss Charteris passed through the great hall, the tap-tap of her heels sounding distinctly on the tesselated floor, and stood for one instant at a door that led first under a colonnade and thence to the grounds which her windows overlooked. While she was standing here her cousin sauntered into view; and, moving forward with languid grace, she went to meet him.

"*La dame blanche,*" he said, tossing away an unfinished cigarette. "You startled me, Cousin Vane—you crept out so quietly and look so like a spirit."

"I am quite real, I assure you," Vane answered. "But why have you thrown away your cigarette?"

Stuart laughed as he answered:

"It is against my mother's rules to smoke immediately before dinner, but I love my weed, and am scarcely conscious when I am smoking or not. Please forgive me. I have been a savage for so long, I have forgotten my good manners."

"Ah, I want to hear all about your travels and adventures!" said Miss Charteris. "Have we time to stroll up and down for awhile before dinner?"

"But you will be tired," remonstrated Stuart, mindful of his mother's injunctions; "and"—glancing at the small dainty white feet—"I am afraid you will ruin your pretty shoes!"

"I am not afraid of either calamity," Vane responded, with a smile; "however, let us split the difference and go to the conservatory."

Stuart agreed willingly. He was most favorably impressed by his new cousin. She was no hypochondriacal

creature, but a young beautiful girl, and likely to prove a most agreeable companion. He glanced at her dress as they sauntered slowly along the colonnade to the conservatory, mentally declaring it to be most charming and simple, deciding it to be most probably the work of her own hands, and would have been thunderstruck had any one informed him that the innocent-looking garment had cost nearly fifty pounds.

Vane Charteris saw her cousin's admiration, and her heart thrilled. Once more she would taste the joy of power, she would no longer be neglected. A vision of future triumph filled her mind at that instant. She would wake from her indifference. The world should see her again as queen, reigning this time by charm and fascination as well as by her beauty. The color mounted to her cheeks, the light flashed in her eyes, at the thought, and she turned with animation and interest to converse with the man beside her.

"You have a beautiful home, Stuart," she observed, after they had walked through the heavily scented conservatory to the drawing-room. "I am glad I have come."

"And I am heartily glad to welcome you. I have heard so much of my Cousin Vane, such stories of triumphs and wonders that I began to despair of ever receiving her here."

"You forget," said Vane, softly, waving her great feather-fan to and fro—"there is an attraction here now that at other times was wanting."

She spoke lightly, almost laughingly, but her words pleased the man's vanity.

"Can it be that I am that attraction?" he asked, quickly. Then he added, "Cousin Vane, I am indeed honored."

"You jump to hasty conclusions," she retorted, "but I will pardon your excessive vanity, if you will give me a spray of stephanotis for my dress."

"Is it your favorite flower?" he asked, leading the way back to the conservatory.

"I love all flowers," Vane answered—"that is," she added, carelessly, "all hot-house flowers."

"You shall be well supplied in future."

"Thanks."

She drew off her gloves and pinned the spray of wax-like flowers amid her laces. Her hands were white and delicate, yet Stuart's mind unconsciously flew to two little brown

ones he had seen that afternoon grasping a plainly bound book. There was even more beauty in them than in his cousin's, he thought.

"I shall look to you, Cousin Stuart," Miss Charteris observed, as she fastened her gloves again, "to initiate me into the mysteries of country life. I intend to dabble in farming, milk the cow, toss the hay, picnic in the fields, and get quite burned and brown."

Stuart laughed a little constrainedly. He was thinking of his picnic for next Wednesday, and wondering whether he could induce his cousin to be kind to Margery. His mother, for some unaccountable reason, did not appear to like the girl.

"We must get a native of Hurstley to act as cicerone," he responded, breaking off a leaf from sheer wantonness. "I have been away so long, I have almost forgotten my home."

"What are you going to do, now you are back?"

"Nothing—that is, nothing definite. You see, my father is very shaky, and I must relieve him of some of his duties. My mother has a strong wish that I should stand for Chesterham."

"A parliamentary career?" questioned Vane. "How would you like that?"

"Not at all," Stuart answered, frankly. "Legislation is not my *forte*. I am, if anything, a sportsman."

"English to the backbone! Cousin Stuart, I am disposed to like you."

"Is that true?" Stuart asked, gravely.

Vane turned and met his gaze, then laughed softly.

"True? Of course it is; are we not cousins? The liking, however, must not be altogether on my side."

"Have no fear," the young man began, but at that instant the dinner-gong sounded, and his sentence remained unfinished.

Vane was led in by her cousin, and they were even yet more amicable during the meal, to Mrs. Crosbie's intense satisfaction. She made no effort to interrupt the merry conversation of the young people, and contented herself with now and then joining in the flow of reminiscences in which her husband and Lady Charteris were indulging.

Squire Crosbie was a tall thin man with a worn, almost haggard face. Its prevailing expression was kindly but

weak, and he turned instinctively to his wife for moral support and assistance. Stuart dearly loved his father. The gentle student disposition certainly was not in harmony with his own nature; but he had never received aught but tenderness and love from his father, and grew to think of him as a feeble plant that required warmth and affection to nourish it. His feeling for his mother was entirely different. He inherited his strong spirit from her, the blood of an old sporting family flowed in her veins. She was a powerful domineering woman, and Stuart had been taught to give her obedience rather than love. Had he been permitted to remain always with his mother, his nature, although in the abstract as strong as hers, might by force of habit have become weakened and altered; but, as soon as he had attained his majority, he had expressed a determination to travel, and in this was seconded for once most doggedly by his father. Those two years abroad did him an infinite amount of good; but to Mrs. Crosbie they did not bring unalloyed delight. Her son had gone from her a child obedient to her will, he returned a man and submissive only to his own.

Lady Charteris resembled her brother the squire; but the intellectual light that gleamed in his eyes was altogether wanting in hers. Her mind was evidently fixed on her child, for even in the thick of a conversation her gaze would wander to Vane and rest on her. She was heartily pleased now at her daughter's brightness, and whispered many hopes to Mrs. Crosbie that this visit might benefit the delicate nerves and health.

Mrs. Crosbie nodded absently to these remarks. She was occupied with her own thoughts. Stuart must marry; and whom could he find better, search where he might, than Vane Charteris for his wife? Beautiful, proud, a woman who had reigned as a social queen—in every way she was fitted to become the mistress of Crosbie Castle. She watched her son eagerly, she saw the interest and admiration in his face, and her heart grew glad. Of all things Mrs. Crosbie had dreaded during those two years' absence, the fear of an attraction or entanglement had been most frequent, and not until she saw him so wrapped up in his cousin Vane did she realize indeed that her fears had been groundless.

CHAPTER V.

"GET on your bonnet, child, and trot away! I shall be content till you come back."

"Mother, I don't like to leave you to-day, you seem so weak. Miss Lawson will not mind—let me stay with you."

Mrs. Morris put out her weak hand and caressed the soft silky hair.

"No, no, child," she persisted, gently. "You must go to yer lessons. Reuben will be 'ome directly; he'll make me a cup of tea; don't you worrit yourself. It's yer day of German, too, and I want you to be well got on by the time her ladyship comes home."

Margery rose slowly from her knees.

"Well, I will go," she said, regretfully; "but let me make you comfortable. There is your book—why, you are getting on quite fast, mother!—and here are the grapes Mr. Stuart sent, close to your hand."

"Heaven bless him for a kind true-hearted gentleman! Ah, there are few like him, Margery, my lass!"

"He is good, indeed," replied the girl, a soft spot of color appearing in her cheeks. "Now, I will go; but first of all I will run into Mrs. Carter's and ask her to come and sit with you."

She bent and kissed the transparent cheek, tied on her sun-bonnet, took up her books, and, with a parting smile, went out of the door-way.

Her message delivered at Mrs. Carter's cottage, Margery went slowly up the hill, past the wall inclosing the wood, on past the gate leading to the Weald, Sir Hubert Coningham's country-house, on and on, till she reached the village. The rectory stood a little way beyond the school-house, close to the church, and, by the time she reached the side-gate, Margery had learned her lesson by heart. The heat was quite as great as it was on the afternoon she walked to Farmer Bright's, now four days ago; and she looked round anxiously at the sky, dreading a cloud until Wednesday was gone and the picnic with Mr. Stuart a thing of the past.

Somehow Margery found her lesson not so delightful to-

day; her attention would wander, and Miss Lawson had to repeat a question three times in one of these moments before she got a response. The governess put down the girl's absence of mind and general listless manner to the heat, and very kindly brought the lesson early to a close and dismissed her pupil.

Margery for the first time gave vent to a sigh of relief when she received permission to go home, and she sauntered through the village almost wearily. She was gazing on the ground, ignorant of what was going on about her, when the sound of ponies' feet and the noise of wheels behind her caused her to turn, and, looking up, she saw Mrs. Crosbie, seated in her small carriage, close at hand.

"Good-afternoon, Margery," Mrs. Crosbie said, in her haughty cold manner. "I am glad to have met you. How is your mother?"

"Good-afternoon, madame," replied the girl, calling Mrs. Crosbie by the name the village always used, and bending her head gracefully. "Thank you very much, but I am afraid mother is very bad to-day; I did not want to leave her, but she insisted. She grows very weak."

"Has Doctor Metcalf seen her to-day?"

"Yes, madame, but he said nothing to me—he looked very grave."

"I was going to send her down some beef-tea and jelly, but as I have met you, it will save the servant a journey. Get in beside Thomas; I will drive you to the castle, and you can take the things to your mother."

Mrs. Crosbie pointed to a seat beside the groom. She was for some reason always annoyed when she came in contact with this girl. In the first place, Margery spoke and moved as her equal; she never dropped the customary courtesy, nor appeared to grasp for an instant the magnitude of the castle dignity. Mrs. Crosbie was wont to declare that the girl was being ruined; that Catherine Coningham had behaved like an idiot; that, because the child had worn delicate clothes and the dead woman had seemed in every way a lady, Margery should be brought up and educated as such was preposterous. It was all absurd, Mrs. Crosbie affirmed, a mere shadow of romance. The letter in the mother's pocket had plainly stated her position—she was a maid, and nothing else, and all speculation as to an honorable connection was ridiculous and far-fetched. Mrs. Cros-

bie did not quarrel with Lady Coningham for rescuing the baby from the work-house—charity she upheld in every way—but she maintained that Margery should have been placed with Mrs. Morris as her child, and that she should have learned her A B C with the other village children in the village school, and that the story of the railway accident and her mother's death should have been carefully withheld from the child. Now the girl's head was full of nothing but herself. The mistress of Crosbie Castle opined that she was fit for no situation, and consequently would come to no good.

Margery was ignorant of all this; but she was never entirely comfortable in Mrs. Crosbie's presence. The waif had within her the germ of pride every whit as great and strong as that possessed by Stuart's mother. Hitherto she had had no reason to intrench herself in this natural fortress, for all the village loved her; the simple-minded folk looked upon her as a being above them; the very fact that Lady Coningham had adopted and educated her raised Margery in their eyes. So the girl had received kindness, in many cases respect; and she was as happy as the lark, save when a wave of mournful thought brought back the memory of her mother.

Mrs. Crosbie wronged her. Margery had not a spice of arrogance in her composition—she had only the innate feeling that she was not of the village class, and, with the true delicacy and instinct of a lady, forbore even to express this.

There was plenty of room on the front seat, but Mrs. Crosbie would not have dreamed of bidding the girl to sit there—she relegated her to what she considered her proper place—among the servants. Margery's face flushed a little.

"If you will allow me," she said, with her natural grace, "I will walk up to the castle, thank you very much."

"Do as I tell you," commanded Mrs. Crosbie, quietly. "Thomas, make room for Margery Daw."

Margery bit her lip and hesitated for a moment, then the memory of the poor sick woman at home came to her. If she offended madame mother would have no more delicacies, so, without another word, she stepped in and was driven briskly out of the village. She sat very quiet beside the shy groom, and, opening her book, a collection of

short German stories, soon lost her vexation in their delights.

Mrs. Crosbie was unduly pleased with herself for bringing this girl to her level, and she was determined to lose no opportunity of continuing it in the future. As they stopped at the lodge-gates she turned to Margery:

"Get down and go along that path to the back part of the house, and wait in the kitchen till I send for you."

Margery obediently descended, and turned down the side-path as the ponies started off along the sweeping avenue to the castle entrance. Why was madame so stern and Mr. Stuart so kind? Margery pondered as she walked on. Had she done anything wrong? Her mind accused her of no fault; she could therefore arrive at no solution of the mystery.

The path she was following was one used by the gardeners, and she soon arrived at a small gate which, on opening, led her to the paddock and kitchen-gardens. Margery toiled through the heat up to the court-yard, and, after crossing this, entered a large door standing wide open.

The cook and her handmaidens were indulging in five-o'clock tea, and the mistress of the kitchen rose with genial hospitality to press her visitor to partake of some too.

"Now do!" she urged, as Margery shook her head. "You look fair fagged out."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Drew," Margery said simply; unconsciously she recoiled from accepting anything that came from Mrs. Crosbie. "I am not really tired. Madame has driven me here from the village. I am to take some things back to mother. If you don't mind, I will wait outside—it is rather hot in here."

"Ay, do, child," the cook answered; and she handed out a large stool. "Put this just in the door-way, and you'll catch a little draught."

With a smile Margery took the stool, and, placing it in a shady corner, sat down and began to read. The court-yard stretched along a quadrangle leading to the stables, and, looking up now and then from her book, Margery caught glimpses of the castle horses lazily switching their tails in their comfortable boxes. The pony-carriage was driven in while she waited, and she watched with much interest the small sturdy ponies being unharnessed and led

away. It was a quaint, picturesque spot—the low-roofed stables, the larger coach-house, a portion of the gray-stone castle jutting out in the distance, with a background of branches and faintly moving leaves. Margery shut her book and let her eyes wander to the clear blue sky seen in patches through the trees. She felt cool in her little nook, and enjoyed the rest. The groom had discarded his smart livery, and, in company with another lad, was busily employed in cleaning the pony-carriage, the hissing sound with which he accompanied his movements not sounding unmusical from a distance; and Margery found herself smiling at his exertions and the confidence that had succeeded his bashfulness. Suddenly, while she was watching them, she saw the groom and his companion draw themselves up and salute some one; and then the next moment a figure came round the corner—a figure in white tennis-costume, with a white silk shirt and large flapping hat. Margery felt her cheeks grow warm, than they as quickly cooled. Another figure stood beside the tall one of the man, a dainty, delicate, lovely form in a dress of ethereal blue, holding a large sunshade of the same color above her beautiful head.

Unconsciously Margery felt her heart sink. Never had she seen so fair a vision before; and the sight of those two figures, so well matched and so close together, brought a strange vague pain to her, the nature of which she could not guess. She dropped her eyes to her book again, and shrunk back into her corner, hoping to escape notice. She was too far away to hear what was said, and she began to breathe freely again after a few minutes, when the faint sound of a musical laugh was borne on the air and the tones of a deep clear voice she knew well came nearer and nearer. She pulled her sun-bonnet well over her eyes and bent still lower over her book as the voices drew closer.

"If you are ill after this, Cousin Vane," she heard Stuart say, "I shall never forgive myself. The heat is terrific, you know. Are you quite sure you can manage it?"

"Quite," answered the woman's voice. "I want to see this poor doggie; besides, you tell me it is just as far back again as round this way."

"Just as far. Well, here we are! Poor Sir Charles, I hope the old fellow is better."

The two figures came into sight; they were about six yards from Margery, and were walking slowly. She could see the delicate blue drapery, the slender gauntleted hand, though she did not raise her eyes; and she drew back into her corner with a nervous dread such as she had never felt hitherto.

Mr. Crosbie led his cousin to a small outhouse immediately facing the kitchen door, and was about to open the door, when, looking round, he saw Margery. His face flushed for an instant; then, before his cousin could perceive it, his embarrassment was gone.

"There, Vane," he said easily, opening the door and pointing to a large colly lying on a heap of clean straw. "Don't be afraid; he won't hurt you. Poor Sir Charles —poor old fellow!" He stooped and took up a bandaged paw. "I shall have you about in a day or two. He wants some fresh water. Margery"—he left his cousin's side a little, and looked straight at the girl sitting up in the corner—"Margery, will you kindly ask one of the maids to bring me some water for Sir Charles?"

Margery put down her book without a work, went indoors, brought a jug, then walked to the well a little to the left, and, having filled the jug, approached him.

"Thank you. Why did you trouble, Margery?" said Stuart courteously. "How is your mother to-day?"

"She is no better, Mr. Stuart, thank you," returned Margery, in her clear refined voice. "I am waiting for some things madame is kindly going to send her."

Vane Charteris had turned at the first sound of the girl's voice, and she was almost alarmed at the beauty of the face before her. Beside the golden glory of that hair, the depths of pathetic splendor in those eyes, the pale transparency of that skin, her own prettiness simply faded away. She noted the grace and ease with which Margery moved, and immediately conceived a violent dislike to this village girl.

"Vane, let me present to you one of my old playfellows —Margery Daw. You were wanting some one to point out all the beauties of Hurstley. I am sure no one could do that half so well as Margery."

Miss Charteris bent her head and smiled at her cousin.

"Many thanks, Stuart; but you forget we have planned to discover the mysteries of the country together without

any assistance—a spice of adventure is always charming."

Margery turned away, with a bow to Stuart—she did not speak, or look at his companion—and she overheard Miss Charteris say, with a scornful laugh, as she walked back to her seat:

"Dear Cousin Stuart, you should be more merciful; that girl's hair is so painfully red, it makes me quite uncomfortable in this heat."

Margery did not hear the reply—her lips were quivering and her hands trembling with mortification—and, when she looked up again, the housekeeper was handing her a basket, and the cousins were gone.

"Madame sends your mother some beef-tea, a bottle of brandy, and some fruit and jelly," said the housekeeper, closing the basket-lid. "It is rather heavy; and mind you carry it carefully. Can you manage it?"

"Yes," said Margery, steadily. "Thank you; I am much obliged."

She turned with her heavy load and walked across the court-yard, her heart no lighter than her basket.

That lovely looking stranger had made fun of her—fun—and to Mr. Stuart! Perhaps he had laughed too. The thought was too painful. And was she not a sight? Look at her old pink gown, well washed and mended, her clumsy boots, her sunburned hands. The memory of that dainty figure looking like a fairy in her delicate garments rose to her mind, and her head drooped. Yes, she was a common village girl—madame treated her as such; and now Mr. Stuart would turn too. Oh, why could she not tear aside the veil of mystery and know what she really was? Could that face treasured in her locket be only the face of a maid, or did her heart speak truly when it called that mother madame's equal?

Margery was pained and troubled as she took her way along the paddock—pained not so much at the woman's words as at the thought that the man had re-echoed them and deemed her stupid and plain. She had grown to look on Stuart Crosbie as something bright and delightful in her life. They had played together as children, and the memory of that friendship was the strongest link in the chain that held him as her hero. When he was away, Stuart had written once or twice to Margery, sending her

views of the places he visited, and giving her long chatty accounts of his travels. When he came home, they renewed their intimacy; there was not a shadow of surprise or fear in Margery's mind when the young squire came so frequently to see her.

She had no suspicion that this friendship would annoy his mother or was in any way strange or uncommon. She liked Stuart Crosbie; she could talk to him of her studies, her pursuits—a sealed book in her home—and gradually grew to welcome him as a companion with whom she could converse easily and naturally and as a friend who would never fail her. Mrs. Morris was too great an invalid to devote much thought to the girl's amusements, nor would she have been greatly troubled had she known how intimate the young squire and Margery had become; so the girl had had no constraint put upon her; she met, walked and chatted with Stuart Crosbie as freely as she liked, and no cloud had dawned on her happy life till to-day.

The sight of that other girl, so different from herself, had brought a strange sharp pang, but that was lost in the pain she endured when she thought that Stuart had agreed with the cruel remark, and that his friendship was gone forever. She wended her way along the paddock, and was turning through the gate to enter the gardeners' path again, when a hand was stretched out from beside her, took the basket from her, and, putting a finger under her chin, raised her head from its drooping position.

"Well?" said Stuart quietly.

"Give me my basket, please, Mr. Stuart," Margery murmured hurriedly, a crimson wave of color dyeing her cheeks.

"What for?" asked the young man calmly.

"I must get home. I am very late as it is."

"Well, why don't you go?" Stuart inquired, watching the color fade from her cheeks.

"I can not go without my basket," Margery answered, trying to be at her ease. "Please give it to me, Mr. Stuart."

"No," he answered briefly.

"Then I must go without it!" she exclaimed; and, suiting the action to the word, she began to move down the path.

Stuart followed at once, and put a detaining hand on her arm.

"Here is your basket, Margery. I was only teasing you. What a time you have been! I have been waiting here for you for the last five minutes."

Margery's heart grew lighter again.

"You might have been better employed," she returned, with the quaint sharpness Stuart always admired. "But, if you have time to waste, I have not. Listen! There—it is striking six, and mother will wonder what has become of me!"

"Yes, that is six," observed Mr. Crosbie, listening to the clock chiming from the castle. "You will get home by seven, Margery, if you start at once. Not that way!"—as she turned again down the path. "This is nearly half a mile nearer." He pushed open the gate and motioned her into the paddock again. "Now," he continued, slinging the basket on his arm and turning beside her across the field, "why are you cross with me, Miss Margery?"

"I am not cross with you," Margery answered hurriedly.

"Not now, perhaps; but you were."

Margery was silent.

"What was it, Margery?" he asked gently.

"I heard what that lady said about me just now," she replied, after a pause; "and—and—"

"You are angry with me. That is hardly fair—rough on an old friend, you know."

"I thought you might have—" She stopped.

"Agreed with her. You ought to know me better than that, Margery."

The grave tones went to her heart.

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried. "It was wrong; but—she is so beautiful, and I—"

"You are—"

"Only a village girl beside her."

"I wonder if you know how different you are from her?" Stuart said quietly.

Margery's face flushed.

"I never felt I was—common till to-day," she answered.

"Margery!"

She looked up quickly. Mr. Crosbie checked his words and laughed a little constrainedly.

"You must not grow vain," he said.

"Am I vain? I will remember another time," she responded gravely.

"And remember this too," Stuart added—"that, whatever any one may say, my opinion of you does not change—never will."

She smiled with delight.

"Thank you, Mr. Stuart," she said simply. "And now please give me my basket; you must not come any further."

"I shall carry it home for you," he answered. "We shall not be long, and this is tons too heavy for your little hands. Tell me of your lesson. What have you done to-day, and what is that book?"

Margery immediately broke into a long account of her studies, and with her happy serenity restored, she walked on beside him, heedless of the dust or the sun—content that their friendship was unaffected.

Stuart Crosbie listened with pleasure to the ripple of her voice, his eyes never tired of wandering to her sweet face, lovely in its innocence; but, when he had parted from her and strode home along the lanes, his brow was clouded and a puzzled expression rested upon his face.

CHAPTER VI.

WEDNESDAY morning broke clear and cloudless. Margery rose at an early hour, and sat looking out of her little window at the sun gilding the fields and trees with its glory. Stuart Crosbie too rose earlier than was his wont; and he occupied the time till the breakfast-gong sounded in walking up and down his room, apparently in deep thought. As the muffled summons reached his ear, he uttered an impatient "Pshaw!" and made his way slowly down the stairs. His mother was seated at the table when he entered the room; and he had scarcely exchanged greetings with her when Vane Charteris made her appearance. It was not Miss Charteris's usual custom to honor the breakfast-table with her presence; but since her stay at Crosbie,

the mood had seized her, and she descended regularly to the early meal.

"Good-morning, my dear," said Mrs. Crosbie, smiling her sweetest. "You look as fresh as a rose; doesn't she, Stuart?"

"Words always fail me to describe Cousin Vane's beauty," was his gallant reply.

Vane smiled languidly; but she was not quite happy. There was something strange about this cousin of hers; he was attentive, but his attentions seemed to be the outcome of habit rather than inclination. Was her power to fail her here too?

"What is the programme for to-day?" she asked, as she drew her chair to the table.

"We must devise something," observed Mrs. Crosbie. "Ah, Vane, my dear, I fear you find this place very dull!"

"Dull!" repeated Miss Charteris. "I can not tell you, my dear aunt, how happy I am in your lovely home."

Mrs. Crosbie felt her heart swell; more and more she saw the advisability of a marriage between Stuart and his cousin, more and more she determined it should take place.

"Well, Stuart, what are we to do to amuse Vane?" she inquired, turning to her son, with the pleasure called up by her niece's speech still lingering on her face.

"I am afraid, mother, I shall not be able to offer my services to-day. I am bound for Chesterham this morning," Stuart answered, vigorously attacking a pie on a side-table.

"Chesterham!" ejaculated his mother. "Why, what takes you there, Stuart?"

"An appointment with Derwent. He has written and asked me to meet him at the junction on his way to town; he wants to see me."

"Why could not Captain Derwent come here for a few days?" inquired Mrs. Crosbie coldly. She was annoyed that anything should interrupt the acquaintance that was progressing so satisfactorily.

"He can't; he is due in London."

"But must you go?" began his mother, when Vane interrupted with—

"Oh, please don't stop him, auntie dear, or he will vote me such a nuisance! Indeed, we can spare Stuart for one

day, and I will enjoy myself with you if you will let me. We have not driven to any places yet; shall we not go somewhere to-day?"

"I shall be pleased," Mrs. Crosbie replied, though she looked vexed; and all other remarks on the subject were stopped, to Stuart's great relief, by his father's appearance —Lady Charteris never left her room till noon.

The squire came in with his curious halting gait; he carried a bundle of letters and papers in his hand, and his haggard features wore a look of surprise.

"Good-morning, my dear," he said to Vane. "Constance"—to his wife—"I have received a most extraordinary surprise. Read that"—holding out a letter.

With ill-concealed impatience Mrs. Crosbie took the letter he held toward her.

"What sort of a surprise, dad?" asked Stuart, putting his hand for an instant into his father's.

"Your mother will tell you," answered the squire.

"From Douglas Gerant!" exclaimed Mrs. Crosbie, gazing at the end of the letter. "This is a surprise indeed! Why, Sholto, he is in England—has been for the last month—and wants to come to us for a visit!"

"By Jove!" was Stuart's only utterance.

"It seemed like a letter from the dead," said the squire dreamily. "What years since one has heard or seen anything of Douglas Gerant! It must be fifteen at least since he left England."

Mrs. Crosbie folded up the letter.

"He is not changed," she observed—"at least his letter is as strange and erratic as of old. Vane, you have heard your mother speak of Douglas Gerant, have you not?"

Miss Charteris puckered her brow.

"I don't remember his name," she replied. "Who is he?"

"Your mother's cousin—surely she must have spoken of him!"

"I have heard of Eustace Gerant," Miss Charteris answered; "but he is dead."

"This is his brother. He too might have been dead for all that we have seen or heard of him. He was a ne'er-do-wee'l, an utter scamp."

"But with great good in him," added the squire warmly.

"I know you did not think so, Constance; but Douglas always had a fine generous nature."

"It was well hidden then," his wife retorted coldly. "I never had much sympathy with him, and I have less now. A man has no right to be lost to the world as he has been, and leave a magnificent inheritance wasting and neglected when there are others who would prize it."

"Is this the long-lost cousin who owns Beecham Park?" asked Vane, with sudden interest. "Oh, then I have heard of him, of course!"

"He came into the property ten years ago," Stuart explained, "and he has not come home till now. I must confess I always had a strong sympathy for this unknown cousin. What a strange life his has been! I am tempted to envy him the wonders he must have seen."

"I am surprised you should speak like that, Stuart," said his mother coldly. "I can not understand any man of principle putting aside his duties for his inclinations."

Miss Charteris looked bored.

"Is he married?" she asked languidly.

"No, no, my dear," answered Mrs. Crosbie quickly; "by some marvelous chance he has escaped matrimony. I always expected to hear of a low-born wife; but he appears to have a little of the Gerant pride within him, and has spared us that humiliation."

"Then he has no heir?" Vane observed.

Mrs. Crosbie did not reply immediately; but Miss Charteris saw her handsome eyes wander to Stuart's face and rest there.

"He has the power of willing Beecham Park," Mrs. Crosbie remarked: and the squire broke in with his quiet monotonous voice—

"I have often wished Douglas had married; he was just the man to be led to good things by a good woman."

"You always were absurd on this subject, Sholto," his wife remarked quietly; and the squire discreetly said no more.

Stuart moved from the table as the meal ended, and engrossed with the newspaper, was lost to all that was passing around.

"I will write this morning and bid Douglas welcome," Mrs. Crosbie said after awhile. As she rose, she turned to the butler—"Fox, tell Mrs. Marxham to prepare some

rooms for Sir Douglas Gerant; I expect he will arrive to-morrow. Now, Vane, I will leave you for half an hour; then, if you will equip yourself, we will drive this morning."

"Thanks, auntie;" and Miss Charteris walked slowly across the room to one of the long French windows, looking thoughtful and not altogether displeased.

"The power to will Beecham Park," she mused; "and the heir must be Stuart Crosbie. His mother's eyes spoke that plainly."

Miss Charteris glanced at the tall well-built form of Stuart, who was still intent on the newspaper, and for the first time the thought of a warmer feeling dawned in her heart. She found this cousin a more agreeable companion than she had imagined; she was irresistibly attracted by his manliness and charm of manner. Might she not gratify her ambition as well as her fancy if she chose this young man for her husband? As mistress of Crosbie Castle she would once again reign in her world, but as mistress of Crosbie Castle and Beecham Park her sovereignty would be greater than she had even dreamed of. Vane felt her heart swell within her at the glorious prospect her imagination conjured up; and, standing in the soft morning sunlight, she vowed to link her lot with Stuart Crosbie, and be his wife.

She left the window and walked toward him.

"You are most unkind, Mr. Crosbie," she said, looking sweetly plaintive. "You are going to leave me all day, and you bury yourself now in those dry papers."

Stuart put down the newspaper quickly; he had been utterly unconscious of her presence.

"I beg your pardon, Vane," he said, smiling; "indeed it was very rude of me."

"I forgive you this time," she returned, extending her white hand, "on condition that you promise to come home early from your meeting with this tiresome man."

Stuart colored faintly. It was true that he had received a letter from his friend Captain Derwent, also true that that friend would pass through Chesterham at some time during the day; but Stuart's appointment was not with Captain Derwent. In an hour's time he was to meet Margery, and start for their picnic in the woods.

"I shall get back as soon as I can," he said hurriedly. "In truth, Vane, I am afraid that you find Crosbie hor-

ribly dull; there is nothing or no one to amuse you. It will be better in a day or two, for I intend to invite one or two people for the twelfth."

"I don't want them," Miss Charteris observed, raising her large blue eyes to his; "and, do you know, Cousin Stuart, strange though it may seem, I am not at all dull in your society."

Stuart bowed low at her words.

"You are easily satisfied," he replied; and at that moment his mother reappeared.

"Now, Vane, I am at your service. By the bye, Stuart, shall we not drive you to Chesterham? I can easily order the barouche instead of the pony-carriage."

"Oh, no, thanks!" he answered hurriedly. "I prefer to walk."

Mrs Crosbie elevated her eyebrows, but made no remark; and Vane followed her aunt from the room. On reaching the door, she looked back and kissed her hand.

"*Au revoir*, Cousin Stuart!" she said lightly. "Don't stay away too long."

Stuart waited only till the ladies had well disappeared; then he walked across the hall, caught up his tennis-hat, and made his way along the colonnade to the grounds. He stopped at the entrance to the court-yard and whistled for his dogs, then, without another look round, started across the paddock to the village.

* * * * * * *

Margery was dressed early, and had packed a small basket with some home-made cakes and apples as provender for the picnic. She had told Mrs. Morris of her holiday and Mr. Stuart's kindness, and occupied herself with many little duties of love for the sick woman before she left her.

Mrs. Morris watched with tender eyes the slender form flitting about the room in its plain white-cotton gown. All the wealth of her childless heart was bestowed on this girl, and in return she received pure and deep affection.

"Now are you quite sure, mother, you will not miss me?" asked Margery, kneeling by the couch when all her duties were done.

"Nay, that I can not say," Mrs. Morris returned, with a faint smile. "I always miss you, child; but I shall not want you. Mrs. Carter is coming in to see me, and Reuben has promised to come home for dinner."

"Reuben will keep his word then," declared the girl; "but I shall not be away long."

"Stay and amuse yourself, Margery—you are young, and should have pleasure. Now get on your bonnet and start, or you will keep the young squire waiting."

Margery tied on her sun-bonnet. At first she had been tempted to don her Sunday hat, a plain wide-brimmed straw with a white ribbon; but she checked herself and put it away, with a blush at her vanity. She took her little basket, and, walking slowly toward the spring, sat down by its musical trickling to wait. She felt more than ordinarily happy; the memory of Stuart's kind words had driven away the sting of his cousin's remark; there was not a cloud on the horizon of her young life. She wanted for nothing to complete her happiness, and reveled in the sunshine and the golden glory of summer as only a heart can that has tasted no sorrow, seen not the darkness or gloom of pain.

She had not waited long before the sound of hastening footsteps told her that Stuart was at hand; and she bent to caress the dogs as he approached, thus hiding the pleasure that dawned on her face.

"I am fearfully late, Margery," Stuart said apologetically, as he flung himself down on the cool mossy bank. "By Jove, though, I had no idea I could walk so fast! I have come here in no time."

"You do look tired," she said quickly; "let us rest awhile. Shall I get you some milk?"

Stuart shuddered. The thought recalled all the horrors of Judy's draught that summer morning.

"No, thanks; I will have some water. Do you know, Margery, I don't believe I can go very much further. What do you say to a picnic in the Weald wood?"

"I think it will be very nice. But, Mr. Stuart, where is your basket?"

"My basket?" he echoed.

"Yes—your lunch," said Margery, holding out her tiny hamper. "You have forgotten it."

"Yes, I have. Will it matter?" asked Stuart, gravely, thinking he had never seen so sweet a picture as the girl before him.

"Well, you know, to picnic it is necessary to have some food: but perhaps, I have enough for both."

"I devoutly hope so!" exclaimed Mr. Crosbie. "May I ask, Margery, what your basket contains?"

"Cakes and apples," she answered promptly.

"Hum!" observed Stuart meditatively. "That sounds solid, Margery."

"Don't you like cakes and apples?"

"Do you?" he asked.

"Very much."

"Then I do too. Now let us get into the woods. By the bye, is Reuben about?"

"No; I believe he has gone to some of Sir Hubert's farms. He started very early this morning; but he will be home to dinner. Did you want him, Mr. Stuart?"

"No, not particularly. But what a lark if they take us up for trespassing—eh, Margery!"

Margery laughed heartily at the idea.

"What would they do to us?" she asked.

"Transport us for life perhaps," Stuart replied, with a laugh, as he mounted the narrow wall. "How would you like that, Margery?" he added.

"Would that mean going away from here?"

Stuart nodded.

"I should not like it at all then," she declared.

"Then you intend to live in Hurstley all your life? Give me your hand; there—that is right. The dogs will clear it."

Margery jumped lightly from the wall to the soft turf, and then watched the easy way in which the colly and retriever scaled the wall.

"How clever they are!" she cried, stooping to pat them.

"But you have not answered me. Do you intend to live here all your life?" said Stuart, as they strolled in the cool shade of the trees.

Margery looked at him quickly.

"I have never thought about it, Mr. Stuart," she replied. "Would it be wrong to wish it?"

"Wrong?" he repeated. "No, Margery, of course not."

"I love Hurstley," the girl went on thoughtfully. "Mother lives here, and Reuben, and Lady Coningham, though I can not remember her well—still I love her; then there are Miss Lawson and all the village."

"No one else?" queried Mr. Crosbie, fixing his eyes on her face.

"Yes—you, Mr. Stuart," Margery answered softly. "You are here too."

"But suppose that all these friends were to go away—suppose you were left alone—would you care for Hurstley then?"

Margery's face paled.

"I never thought of that," she murmured. "Oh, I could not stay then; it would be terrible!"

Stuart opened his lips as if to speak, then closed them firmly again, and for awhile there was silence between them as they walked. At last the young squire spoke. They had reached a clump of trees, a cooler, shadier spot, and here he stopped.

"Let us unpack that gigantic basket here, Margery," he said lightly. "This is the very nook for a picnic."

Margery tossed off her bonnet, and the young man, stretched at full length on the soft grass, feasted his eyes on her radiant beauty, feeling that with every look his determination to see less of this girl was slipping from him, and that for him happiness was found only when in her presence.

CHAPTER VII.

VANE CHARTERIS found the day pass very slowly, with no one but her aunt to amuse her. She sat listlessly beside Mrs. Crosbie during the long drive, feeling bored and wearied, and yawned through the afternoon in her room, finding no pleasure in her mother's society and less in her own. The thought that had come to her suddenly in the morning grew stronger as the hours passed. As Stuart Crosbie's wife, she would taste once more the sweetness of her lost power.

She was leaning by her open window, thinking this, heedless of the beauty of the picture that stretched before her, when her eyes fell on a man's figure strolling leisurely on the lawn—a strange, odd-looking man, who seemed not quite at home in his surroundings. Miss Charteris, roused from her languor, watched him intently, and at once determined that the intruder was a tramp—perhaps one of a gang of thieves. She rose quickly, and made her way from her room, picking up her sun-shade as she went. Her aunt was out at a garden-party, which she had vainly

tried to induce Miss Charteris to attend, her mother was enjoying a siesta, and her uncle was absorbed in his books. There was no one about, and the castle seemed quite deserted as Vane walked across the hall to the back grounds. The man was standing as she had seen him last, his hands in his pockets, his hat pulled low over his brows. She went toward him at once.

"What are you doing here?" she asked sharply. "Do you know you are trespassing?"

The man turned at her first word; he looked at her keenly from a pair of earnest gray eyes, then slowly, and with unmistakable courtesy, removed his slouched felt hat.

"Trespassing?" he repeated, in a cool tone. "Do they prosecute at Crosbie Castle if a man is found gazing only?"

"You are insolent," Miss Charteris responded frigidly; "and, if you do not leave at once, I shall send some of the servants to you."

The man replaced his hat, with a curious expression on his face.

"Pray save yourself that trouble," he said dryly. "I am going; but may I ask if I have the honor of speaking to Mrs. Crosbie?"

Vane's face flushed.

"No," she said coldly.

"Ah! Miss Crosbie, perhaps?"

"No," she repeated again.

"Indeed! Then, madame, by what right do you eject me?"

"I am Mrs. Crosbie's niece, and, in her absence, do what I know she would desire."

"Mrs. Crosbie's niece!" repeated the man. "So Mrs. Crosbie rules the castle! Where is the squire?"

Miss Charteris moved away a little.

"I shall answer no more questions," she said quietly. "I must request you to go away at once."

"There spoke George Charteris!" muttered the stranger, as if to himself.

Vane started; she could hardly believe her ears. This shabby man to mention her father's name! It was extraordinary, and not pleasant.

"I do not know who you are," she said, with marked irritation; "but you have heard what I said, and you take

no notice of my words. It now remains for the servants to see if they will be more successful."

"Softly, softly, my young lady!" said the man, putting his hand on her arm. "You are much too hasty, and, like all intemperate spirits, judge by appearances only. How do you know whether I have business here or not—whether my visit may not be that of a friend?"

"Friend!" echoed Miss Charteris sarcastically, at the same time hurriedly drawing her arm from his touch.

"I see," continued the stranger, half closing his eyes, and fixing her with a look which annoyed and fidgeted her, "I see you count Squire Crosbie's friends by the cut of their coats. Stay: let me convince you that people are not always what they seem."

At that moment a footman was passing along the colonnade; and, calling in a loud voice, the stranger attracted his attention.

"Is your master in?" was the question, put easily and naturally.

The footman hesitated for an instant; but the presence of Miss Charteris reassured him.

"Yes, sir."

"Kindly inform him that I am here."

"What name, sir?" the man asked.

"Sir Douglas Gerant."

The footman bowed and turned away, while Vane felt that she wished the ground would open and swallow up this queer, dried, cynical cousin or herself—it mattered not which. Never had she been in so disagreeable a position. Sir Douglas came to her rescue.

"Will you forgive me?" he said, quietly extending his hand, a long thin white hand, which seemed strangely at variance with his rough, ill-cut clothes.

"It is I who must ask that," she replied. "Of course, had I known—"

"Naturally, naturally," interrupted Sir Douglas. "Let us say no more about it. So my cousin Constance is out? Well, I hope she will forgive me for taking her by storm in this way. And where is her boy?"

"Stuart has gone to Chesterham."

"Hum! And is he a nice fellow? Do you like him?"

Miss Charteris hesitated.

"Yes," she replied slowly, "I like Stuart very much. You will see him this evening."

"Hum!" observed Sir Douglas again; and at that instant, the squire's tall thin figure appeared, a look of undisguised pleasure on his face.

"My dear Douglas!"

"Sholto, old fellow!"

The two men clasped hands; no words of stronger welcome were spoken, but their eyes looked all they would say; the hand-grip testified more plainly than words. What memories filled the mind of each as they stood thus face to face—the traces of the world's buffets in their worn lineaments—memories of two young forms with hope and vigor shining in their glowing eyes, determination and ambition strong in their hearts.

"Welcome—a thousand times welcome!" said the squire, after a moment's silence. "I received your letter this morning. We expected you to-morrow."

Sir Douglas laughed.

"Yes, I thought so; but I am not an orthodox person at all. I break through all rules and regulations. I look like a tramp. Ask this young lady if she does not think so," he added abruptly.

Vane's face flushed—she was inwardly much annoyed; but Sir Douglas continued, speaking easily, and her confusion was unnoticed.

"I was eager to see you, Sholto, and I started off almost as soon as I had dispatched my letter. I have had a great wish to see you for the last month."

"I am heartily glad to meet you once more," the squire responded; and his face looked brighter than usual. "But how have you come, Douglas?"

"On foot," returned Sir Douglas calmly. "My man will arrive with my traps in about an hour's time."

"On foot from Chesterham! You must be tired out. Come to my study. What volumes of anecdotes we could write, Douglas, of our respective lives! Vane, my dear, will you come with us?"

"No," replied Miss Charteris, with a forced smile. "I will go and tell mamma that Sir Douglas has arrived."

She moved away gracefully as she spoke; Sir Douglas looked after her.

"That is George Charteris's girl?" he asked.

"Yes. She is very beautiful, is she not?" returned the squire dreamily.

"Hum!" observed Sir Douglas to himself. "She may be; but—"

The sentence was left unfinished, and the strange guest followed the squire into the house.

"How unchanged it all is!" he remarked, as he entered the great hall. "I seem to have stepped back into my boyhood again, Sholto. Ah, we don't wear as well as bricks and mortar, old fellow! Only a few short years, and we are both wrecks of what we were!"

They had entered a smaller apartment at the back of the building, one used by the squire as his study and own special sanctum. Books and pamphlets were carelessly strewn about; and the room, in its plain appointments, told clearly and distinctly the character of its owner.

The squire pushed forward a large chair to the window, and Sir Douglas throwing off his hat, seated himself in it, whilst the squire settled himself at the table.

"Did my letter startle you?" asked Sir Douglas suddenly.

"Yes, it did," was the candid answer. "I had begun to think you would never return to England, that you would die as you have lived, a wanderer from your home."

"A weary, restless wanderer—a man, Sholto, with but one thought in his mind, one desire in his wanderings, one wish that has never been fulfilled. Ah, you have judged me as the world has judged me, an ill-conditioned fellow who loved all nations and people above his own! But you have wronged me—the world has wronged me. I am as capable of strong domestic feeling as any man living. I am what I am through trickery and deceit."

The squire gazed earnestly at his cousin's face, the thin features illumined by a sudden rush of color. Sir Douglas turned, and, as his eyes met that earnest gaze, he sunk back slowly in his chair, and the old cynical look came again.

"I must not bore you with my hidden griefs, Sholto," he said dryly; "they are musty and gray now with age."

"You mistake if you think they bore me. I have never judged you hardly, Douglas. Your nature was not a common one. To me your life has fitted your nature."

"My life," echoed the guest a little sadly. "What a

weary turmoil it seems looking back at it now, what ceaseless restlessness! Ah, cousin, you have had the best of it, after all!"

The squire made no reply.

"Let us bury by-gones—they leave a bitter taste behind. I will come to the present, Sholto. I wrote to you with one idea and thought prominent in my mind. In another month or so I shall leave England again, perhaps this time never to return; but, before I go, I want to leave my old inheritance an heir, and I must find him here."

"Here!" repeated the squire. "You forget, Douglas, I am seven years your senior, and in all probability—"

"I do not mean you. You have a son."

"Stuart?" exclaimed the squire. "Yes. You have never seen him, Douglas. He is the best in the world."

"I do not need your word to tell me that. I have heard of this son. The world is very small, and my ears are always sharp. He was in Calcutta last year. Yes, and I was there too."

"Then you know him?"

Sir Douglas shook his head.

"I never saw him; but I heard of his good, warm, generous nature, and, judging him as your son, my heart went out to him."

"It is a noble offer," the squire said, in his quiet simple way. "But is there no one whom you would care to select outside the family? Stuart will inherit the castle, remember."

"There is not a soul," Sir Douglas replied, in low tones. "Don't cross me in this, Sholto; to your son I would willingly give all I possess. Heaven grant he may derive greater happiness from it than I have done!"

There was a silence between the two men; then the squire said gently:

"You look worn and tired, Douglas. Must you leave England again so soon?"

"Yes," Sir Douglas returned briefly. "My search is not ended; if nothing else will support me, revenge will." He paused for an instant, then went on quickly, "Sholto, old fellow, don't think me mad or wild; there is a spot in my past which even you can never see. Only thus much I will tell you, that, though I am a cynical, dry, hard creature now, there was a time, a brief heavenly time, when my

life was as full of joy and vigor as your son's is now. The memory of that dead joy, the memory of my terrible wrong —for I was wronged—has destroyed my life's happiness. I live only for two things—to be revenged and to be satisfied.''

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and strode rapidly up and down the room, while the squire watched him tenderly and sorrowfully. He read the depth of trouble in the grief-distorted face; but he did not seek to know this or learn in any way the truth of his cousin's strange career. Sir Douglas suddenly stopped in his hurried walk.

"I am not myself to-day, Sholto,'' he said, relapsing into his dry manner. "My return to your old home, where everything speaks of the past, has worked badly on me; but the weakness is gone, and—don't be alarmed—it will not come again."

The squire said nothing, but stretched out his hand and grasped his cousin's in silence. Sir Douglas turned away as their fingers unloosened and threw himself into his chair again.

"I shall stay with you for a week or two, Sholto," he went on presently. "I want to make friends with Stuart —and then I shall disappear. I trust your wife will not be alarmed at my rough appearance; I believe I have some decent coats among my things—I must look them out."

"Constance will welcome you warmly," though he shifted his papers nervously about as he spoke.

"More especially when she knows what has brought me," was Sir Douglas's muttered thought.

Then he turned the conversation on other things; and the two men were soon lost in an argument, talking as easily and naturally as though fifteen days, not years, had elapsed since their last meeting.

Meanwhile, away in the Weald grounds, the picnic was progressing well. Margery had spread her snow-white cloth on the turf and placed the dainty cakes and apples upon it; and despite Stuart's grumbling, he eat heartily of the simple repast.

"I call this heavenly!'' he exclaimed, as he lay on the grass, leaning on his elbow, and watched Margery feed the dogs.

"It is nice," she agreed, turning her great sapphire eyes

on him; "but I do all the work and you picnic, Mr. Stuart. I am afraid you are very lazy."

"I know I am," confessed the young man; "but you forget how hard I have always worked, Margery," he added.

Margery shook her wealth of red-gold hair, and laughed a sweet musical laugh that rang through the summer silence.

"Worked," she repeated—"you worked! I don't believe you really know what work means."

"I do seem to have led a purposeless life when I think of it," Stuart observed reflectively. "The hardest day I ever had was when I went tiger-shooting."

"Tiger-shooting!" repeated the girl, paling. "Oh, Mr. Stuart, it sounds so dreadful!"

"You are a little coward, Margery," Stuart laughed. "By Jove, though, how you would have enjoyed some of the things I did! I am sure you would be a good sailor. Margery, how would you like to be out at sea and not a speck of land in sight?"

"I have read of the sea; but I have never seen it," Margery said simply. "But I think I should like it; there must be such a grandeur and beauty in rolling waves and great moving waters. I wish you would tell me something about it, Mr. Stuart."

Stuart moved into a sitting position and leaned his back against the trunk of a giant tree.

"I shall have to write a book about my travels, and dedicate it to you," he said lightly.

Margery smiled, and then put her arm round the colly's neck, and drew the dog's head on to her knees. The retriever had retired to a shady spot, and was stretched out fast asleep. Stuart launched at once into anecdotes of the sea; he knew just where to put a telling touch and wake the interest; and Margery listened eagerly, drinking in the wonders with pretty incredulity and making Stuart break into hearty fits of laughter at her ignorant nautical remarks.

The afternoon passed quickly; the sun had moved round, and cast slanting rays of golden light into the green nook. It touched Margery's head, seeming to rest on the soft silky curls with delight. She looked so sweet in her plain white gown—a very flower of purity and beauty—

that Stuart's eyes, resting on her, would make him hesitate in his story and his heart thrill with a strong wave of unspeakable pleasure. To Margery the moments slipped away too quickly; she reveled in these tales of strange countries, in the adventures and hair-breadth escapes that had filled those two years of travel.

"How beautiful and how strange it must have been, Mr. Stuart!" she said, drawing a deep breath, after awhile. "You must find Hurstley dull."

"Hurstley to me is the most beautiful place in the whole world," Stuart said involuntarily. "I love it."

"Ah, so do I!" cried the girl. "But then I am different." There was a slight pause, and she went on thinking of what he had just told her. "Then I was wrong when I said you had not worked—why, you helped to save the ship that stormy night, Mr. Stuart!"

Stuart smiled as he moved nearer and held out his hand. "There is the mark of the cut from one of the ropes. Now you will give me credit for some good, Margery?"

The girl took the hand between her own two small brown ones. She bent her head to look at the scar, while, at the touch of her fingers, Stuart felt his whole being thrill and the last barrier that stood between himself and his love melt away.

"Yes—yes, I see," Margery said gently. "Oh, Mr. Stuart, what pain you must have suffered!"

She raised her luminous eyes to him, their blue depths darkened almost to blackness at the thought of that terrible night at sea, and met the steady passionate gaze bent on her. Some new sense flooded her mind; in one second all her girlish innocence vanished; she knew that she was on the brink of a great wondrous event, though she could not guess what it was. She dropped Stuart's hand, and rose hurriedly.

"It is getting late; we must go," she declared. "Mother will want me."

Stuart at once moved to her side. He took the sun-bonnet from her hand, and imprisoned the small fingers within his own.

"Margery," he said softly, "is mother the only one who wants you? Will you not stay with me? Ah, my darling," he cried, bending to catch her other hand and seeing the trembling lips and great wondrous startled eyes, "I

have frightened you! You do not know—how could you? how much you have become to me. Margery, I did not mean to speak yet—I meant to wait, and let your love grow; but your sweet face has urged me, and I can wait no longer. Margery, my own darling, I love you! Do you love me?"

Margery felt herself drawn into his strong arms. She looked up at him for one instant, then said softly—

"Love! What is love?"

"Love," cried Stuart, "is the greatest joy or the greatest pain. To love is to think, dream, live only for one person, to be happy when near them, lonely when away, ever longing to clasp their hand, listen to their voice, as I have done these past weeks, my own sweet dear one."

"Then"—the color came vividly into the cream-white cheeks, the eyelids drooped, and the graceful head was bent—"then I do love you, Mr. Stuart; but—"

"But!" interrupted Stuart, gathering her to his arms. "There is no 'but,' my darling, my very own! Oh, Margery, if you could know what happiness I feel! It is such peace after doubt and perplexity. See—just now you threw my hand away; I give it to you again, my darling, yours to defend and tend you when you are my wife."

"Your wife!" faltered Margery; and she trembled—the suddenness, the sweetness of this news seemed to have taken all strength from her. She lived in an indescribable dream of happiness; Stuart's arms were round her, his eyes gazed into hers, his voice was whispering tenderly in her ear. She could not then grasp the full extent of her joy, she was dazed by the passion and depths of his love.

"Yes, my wife, thank Heaven!" said Stuart, reverently raising one small hand to his lips.

"Margery, each day that has gone has linked me closer to you—try as I would, my love would turn to you. There may be storms in life before us," he went on hurriedly, involuntarily drawing the slender form closer to him as he thought of his mother's anger—"there may be trials, battles to fight; but we will be firm and trust in each other. If we have love, we shall be satisfied."

"My love will never, never die," Margery murmured slowly, drawing herself out of his arms. "But it is all so strange—*you* to love *me!* And—ah, what will madame

say, Mr. Stuart? I don't know why, but I am sure she does not like me."

"Margery"—and Stuart drew her back to him again and kissed the sweet lips—"we are pledged to each other, and none shall part us. Leave all to me, and it will come right. And now I have a lesson to teach you—henceforth I am Stuart, and Stuart only; don't forget."

"I will not," she promised. She was silent for an instant, then said softly. "How good you are! I will try to be worthy of you. Something tells me, Stuart, that I am not a common village girl. You will know the truth perhaps some day, and then you will be proud of me."

"I shall never be prouder of you than I am now!" cried the young man fervently. "I care not what you are—I love you; you shall be my wife!"

Margery raised her lovelit eyes, eloquent in tenderness, to his, and then smiled.

"Our picnic is ended," she said, loosing herself from his hold and picking up her sun-bonnet; "the dogs are tired of waiting: we must go."

Stuart watched her pack her basket and tie on the simple head-gear, his heart throbbing with pure passionate love. Henceforth, let come what might, this girl belonged to him—she was his very own.

"Margery," he said, as they stood together before starting, "this is the birth of our happiness. Remember, my darling, that you now are my life, my very soul. If clouds should gather, turn to me and I will sweep them away."

Margery rested her hand for one moment on his shoulder.

"Stuart," she said steadily, "I was a girl an hour ago—I am a woman now. As you love me, dear, so I love you, and ever shall, though a world should stretch between us."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE sun was growing ruddy in its glory, filling the heavens with a radiant beautiful light, Margery had parted with Stuart at the Weald gate, and, urged by the wonder and fullness of her happiness she turned back again to the spot henceforth engraved on her memory with a golden touch. She stood beneath the tree that had reared its branches over her unconscious head through the past hours,

and her heart thrilled again and again at the thought of the marvelous treasure that had come to her. Stuart Crosbie loved her—loved her—Margery Daw—a girl without even a name to call her own! She covered her eyes with her hands, as if to shield them from the memory of his passionate glances. What had she ever done to deserve this happiness? Had not her soul murmured often, fretted beneath the cloud of mystery that hung over her? Ah, how wrong she had been! Even while she had murmured a gift was coming to her, a gift beside which all else faded away and vanished. A sudden impulse moved the girl. She was alone; save for the occasional notes of the birds, the faint flutter of the leaves, there was not a sound to break the silence. On the very spot where she had stood when Stuart uttered his earnest, fervent vows she knelt and sent up words of thankfulness. Then she sunk upon the ground, and, nestling close to the tree, let her fancy wander to the future. She felt at times as if she could not be the Margery of the morning—so far away now—and she almost doubted whether it was not all a dream, till a sudden recollection of her lover's voice—the memory of his words—returned, and she knew it was a blissful reality.

The minutes slipped away, and it was not till the chiming of a distant clock fell on her ear that Margery began to realize how long she had sat and how late it was. She rose hurriedly and made her way through the wood to the path. She had her secret to whisper to the poor sick mother at home, and the thought lent speed to her feet. What joy she would bring to that tender heart! What happiness to share her new delights with such a one!

She ran down the hill, the ripple of the stream sounding in her ears like music, and approached the garden gate. A lady was seated in the cottage door-way; and, as Margery was hurrying up the path, she rose and came to meet her.

"Miss Lawson!" exclaimed Margery, in surprise.

"I have been waiting here nearly an hour," the governess returned; "your mother has been extremely unwell, and—"

"Mother ill!" exclaimed Margery, with a sudden pang. "Oh, let me go to her!"

Miss Lawson put a detaining hand upon the girl's arm.

"You must not disturb her; she has just dropped off to

sleep. Reuben has gone to fetch Doctor Metcalf, and Mrs. Carter is sitting in-doors to see to her."

Margery's face had grown very sad.

"What is it?" she asked, in a low voice. "She was weak when I left her to-day, but not more than usual."

"She had a severe fit of coughing, and it brought on an attack of the hemorrhage again; it has stopped now, but it has left her very weak. You can do nothing just now, Margery; and I came purposely to talk to you."

Miss Lawson was a small thin woman with a quiet determined face, which from long contact with the world had grown almost stern; but there were gleams of warmth and kindliness from the clear gray eyes and a touch even of tenderness about the mouth sometimes. Now, though she spoke in her keen dry way, there was an expression of kindness, almost affection, on her features as she looked at Margery. The girl turned back from the door at once.

"Shall I bring you a chair here, Miss Lawson?" she asked quietly—this news of her mother's illness had fallen as a cloud on the brilliancy of her joy.

"No. Come outside and stroll part of the way home with me," said Miss Lawson. "I have something of importance to say to you—indeed I have wanted to speak to you for several days past; but I had nothing very definite in my mind at the time. To-day I have."

Margery followed the rectory governess down the path in silence.

"Margery," began Miss Lawson, abruptly, "have you ever thought about your future? Have you ever thought what will become of you when Mary Morris dies?"

The flush called up by the first sentence died away quickly, and Margery's face paled. She put her hand suddenly to her heart.

"Is she going to die so soon?" she murmured, involuntarily. "Oh, Miss Lawson, you do not think she will die soon?"

"It is impossible to say," returned the elder woman, quietly. "Mrs. Morris has been gradually sinking all this summer; she may linger for months, or she may pass away at any moment. It is not her present illness that has caused me to speak; as I tell you, I have intended doing so for days past. I have considered it my duty to put matters clearly before you."

She paused for an instant. Margery's face was pained and sad; her heart was heavy with sorrow and dread; all sunshine seemed suddenly to have gone from her life, and, for the moment, Stuart, her lover, was forgotten.

"Perhaps you will think me harsh," Miss Lawson went on, "when I say that I consider it time you began to plan your future life. Remember, you are now about seventeen, and in another year—indeed, now—should take upon yourself the responsibilities of life. Hitherto you have been tended and cared for by two women. Lady Coningham has opened her purse generously, poor Mary Morris has lavished the wealth of her whole heart on you; but now, when she is taken from you, you will have but Lady Coningham to fall back upon; and, unless I judge you wrongly, I think you will grow weary of your dependence, and long to be free. Don't think me unkind, child," continued Miss Lawson, putting a hand on the girl's slender shoulder. "If I did not like you so much—if I did not know the good in your nature—I should not speak so plainly. But you must review your position. You are grown now almost to womanhood; you are educated above the level of many a girl of wealthier station; you have natural gifts that will aid you; and I say distinctly, you should shake yourself free, not with ingratitude, but with a sense of duty and independence. Believe me, Margery, in the long run you will be far happier."

"Yes, you are right," the girl assented. She had followed each word and grasped the meaning instantly. Her natural pride was roused in one moment, and she felt a thrill of desire to add no more to her heavy debt of kindness—to be indeed free.

"Understand me—you must not turn suddenly and be selfishly murmuring over the past," urged Miss Lawson, who had been closely watching the girl. "Whatever happens, be grateful, Margery."

"I am—I am," cried Margery, "thankful to all, and to you, for you have done so much for me, and now you come to help me again?"

"As I shall always help you, I hope," returned the governess. "I knew you would understand me, Margery—I felt you would be true to your nature. I waited only till I had something definite to propose before I spoke to you." She drew out a letter from her pocket as she finished.

"You have heard me speak of my sister, Mrs. Fothergill. This is from her. She has married a doctor in London, a man who is fast becoming celebrated as a specialist. I have written many times about you, and, when we have met, I have chatted to her, till she thoroughly realizes what you are. This letter came only this morning, and it contains something that I thought would just suit you."

"Yes?" said Margery simply.

Miss Lawson unfolded the letter.

"'You have often heard me mention Lady Enid Walsh,'" she read, "'the poor young creature whom John has been attending during the past year. I was sitting with her yesterday. She seems to have taken a fancy to me, and during our conversation she asked me to help her to find a companion. She has a lady with her now, an officer's widow; but she is not a pleasant woman, and they are going to part. I feel so sorry for Lady Enid—young, with beauty and rank, and a cripple for life! She leads such an isolated existence!—for her aunt, Lady Merivale, at whose house she resides, is very old, and almost always confined to her room, and Lady Enid's only brother, the Earl of Court, is never in England. She welcomes me so warmly, and opens her heart to me! She told me that she would like a bright young girl for companion—if possible from the country. Lady Enid adores the country; but she is compelled to live in London to be near the doctors and under the so-called care of her aunt. Immediately she spoke of a country-girl my thoughts flew to your pupil Margery Daw. From your accounts I feel sure she is the very person to suit the poor young invalid. Do you think this could be managed? She would have a luxurious home, a really magnificent salary, and I feel sure would soon grow to love Lady Enid—no one could help doing so. I half said I knew of some one, and she adopted the idea eagerly; so I hasten to write to you.

"'The question is whether Margery would like the life. It would be dull, very dull; but Lady Enid is a most charming and intellectual companion, and very unselfish. I know you have been anxious about your pupil; and this seems such a wonderful chance that I can not help saying I shall be disappointed if it falls through. I suppose Lady Coningham would not object to her protégé's becoming in-

dependent? Write by return, and let me know what you think of my proposal; and, if you approve, try to arrange it as quickly as possible, as the widow-lady leaves in a fortnight."

Miss Lawson folded the letter slowly, and put it back into her pocket.

"That is all," she said quietly. "Now, Margery, it remains for you to express your feelings."

"It is so sudden," responded Margery faintly; her hands were clasped together, her face, hidden behind the flopping sun-bonnet, was perplexed, pained, and troubled. What must she do? How could she leave Hurstley, where every tree and stone was precious to her, and where her heart was bound? Should she speak openly of her love at once, her future marriage with the young squire of Crosbie Castle? The words were on her lips—and then she hesitated. Instinctively she felt that Miss Lawson would not approve of the engagement; and she vividly recalled madame's unceasing dislike. No, she could not speak of it yet; it was so new, so strange; perhaps, after all, it might not be—and her hands pressed her heart closely. She would leave all to him; he must speak out, she could not. And what then must she say to this proposal? Could she leave Hurstley—go from the sun which gave her being life, into a lonely, strange world—leave all that she knew and loved so well—the tiny cottage, the sweet-smelling woods and lanes, and the poor sick woman, a mother in all but truth? That last thought came as a golden gleam.

"Mother!" she said hurriedly, "I can not leave her."

"Then you renounce all thought of independence," she observed coldly, watching the girl's face with something like a frown on her own.

"I do not," replied Margery firmly. "I have listened to your advice, and I will take it; but I must first think of her. She will miss me, Miss Lawson—I know she will."

"Well," said Miss Lawson, after a pause, "that is true. It would be cruel to leave her now. I will write to my sister and thank her in your name, and explain why you refuse."

"You are not cross with me?" Margery murmured, putting out her hand suddenly.

"Cross? No, my child. I wish it might have been arranged; but you are right; it is your duty to stay with Mary Morris, and help to cheer her sad life. In the future, if ever you want help, come to me, and what I can do I will."

Margery's eyes met the governess's steady gaze, and then she bent forward and kissed her.

"I will come to you," she said simply; and the two women separated.

Margery hurried down the hill toward home. She felt weary, almost exhausted; it had been a day of extreme mental excitement. As she passed the woods and the stream, her thoughts went back to Stuart, and she felt again the power of his love. Why should she have doubted him? Why not have spoken bravely of their love? Had he not said himself that storms might come, but he would face them all? To-morrow she would seek Miss Lawson, and, strong in the knowledge of Stuart's great honest heart, tell her all. Now she must hasten to the sick woman, and watch beside her with tender care and hope.

* * * * * * *

Stuart Crosbie strode home to the castle, feeling that he had left behind him everything that made life happy. His love for Margery had been growing slowly but surely during the past three months that had elapsed since his return home. Her beauty bewitched and inthralled him, her freshness and sweetness linked him still more strongly, her daintiness and natural refinement appealed to him through all. He knew there would be trouble, that his mother would denounce his choice; but his mind was made up, his will, the will of which she was so proud herself, would be firm as iron. Let all the world rage, Margery should be his wife. Though she was nameless, a waif, a nobody, was she not a pure, sweet girl? Were these worldly considerations stains on her fair character? No; his heart was given, his mind made up, and nothing should move him. He raised his head proudly at this thought, a look of determination on his face. He was armed for the fray; but while he gloried in his own strength, there came the thought of Margery's weakness. Would she brave the

storm as he could? Would not the bitterness of his mother's anger wound and humiliate her? His face softened. He must shield his sweet love from the fierceness of the battle, tenderly protect her from the cruel wind of harshness and coldness that would most assuredly greet her at Crosbie Castle.

He chose the path through the paddock, and walked through the court-yard just as the tower clock chimed a quarter to eight. He had but a few minutes to change his tennis suit for his dinner garb, and he ran hurriedly from the coach-house round to the lawn, determined to make a rush to his room. He dismissed his dog with a word, sped fleetly across the grounds till he reached the colonnade, and entered it, when suddenly by some mischance his foot slipped. He made a vain effort to save himself; his head swum; he was conscious of a sudden sharp twinge of pain; and, falling heavily, he knew no more.

* * * * * * *

Sir Douglas Gerant, after a lengthened chat with his cousin, mounted to his room, and dressed himself with due regard for the exigencies of polite society. The hard cynical look that had rested on his face during his conversation with Vane Charteris and in the political argument with the squire had now vanished. He looked worn and ill as he walked slowly up and down his room; his eyes were sad, his head drooped. He seemed to be thinking deeply at last, with a deep-drawn sigh, he seated himself at the table and wrote a letter. It was a summons to his lawyer, bidding him draw up a will, and fixing a day for him to come to Crosbie Castle. This done, Sir Douglas leaned back in his chair and covered his eyes with his hand for several minutes. The entrance of his valet, a man who had been his faithful servant and companion for years, roused him; and, bidding the valet dispatch the letter quickly, Sir Douglas left his room and descended the broad staircase. As he passed through the wide hall to the colonnade, its white pillars, gleaming against the background of green, tinged now with the ruddy gold of the setting sun, made a picture gratifying to his artistic eye. He sauntered on, determining to seek the grounds, when his eyes fell on Stuart's prostrate form and pale face. In an instant he was kneeling beside the young man, and his

clear voice rang out to the butler, who happened to be passing to the dining-room.

The man hurried up with some brandy, and Sir Douglas, with almost professional dexterity lifted Stuart's head and poured a few drops between the closed lips. He watched the color slowly return, and the eyes open, with a look of anxiety and tenderness on his face.

"That is right!" he said gently, as he met Stuart's gaze. "Are you hurt?"

"My arm!" murmured the young man faintly, as the butler and Sir Douglas helped him to rise.

The baronet cast a keen glance at the right hand, hanging limp and swollen.

"You have had an ugly fall," he said briefly. "Your arm is broken—how did it happen?"

He pushed Stuart gently into a chair near at hand, and, while he spoke, he deftly cut away the slight tennis-sleeve from the wounded limb with a pair of scissors taken from his pocket.

"I can't quite remember," Stuart replied, speaking with an effort, and passing his left hand over his eyes. "I came an awful cropper, I know, and must have banged my head. Is the arm broken? If so, you had better send for Metcalf, and have it set."

The butler was moving away; but Sir Douglas stopped him.

"There is no need to send to the village—I can manage this. Go up to my room and send down my man; it is not the first time he has helped me in this sort of thing."

Stuart lay back in his chair; he was still feeling faint and weak. He caught Sir Douglas's eye, and smiled a little.

"I feel rather like what the boys used to call a 'jolly duffer,'" he said slowly. "I can't think what made me so stupid; I don't usually fall about in this way. I wonder how long I was insensible—and I have never thanked you for helping me." Stuart was gradually recovering himself, and woke to the fact that this was a stranger. "I beg your pardon."

"It is granted, Cousin Stuart."

Stuart looked mystified, and then said, suddenly putting out his left hand—

"You are Douglas Gerant; I am very glad to see you."

Sir Douglas grasped the hand.

"Thanks, my lad," he said quietly; then, looking round—"Here is Murray. Now sit quiet, and don't speak, and we'll settle you in a trice."

Stuart watched his cousin curiously as he prepared the bandages and improvised some splints; he scarcely felt the long white fingers as they moved over his wounded arm, and winced only as the bones clicked together. But he grew fainter as the bandages were wound round; and, as the operation was finished, Sir Douglas, without a word, held the brandy to his lips again and forced him to drink some.

"You have pluck, Stuart," he said, quietly. "You are of the stuff to make a man. Now, if you take my advice, you will go to your room and rest. I fancy that arm will trouble you rather to-night; so try to get some sleep now."

"My head feels rather queer, I confess," Stuart responded; and he gladly let his cousin draw his hand through his arm, and lead him through the hall to the stairs.

Mrs. Crosbie was sailing down as they approached.

"Stuart," she exclaimed, in genuine dismay, "what is the matter?"

"He has fallen and broken his arm," Sir Douglas answered quietly. "I am taking him to his room; it will be wiser to let him pass, Cousin Constance, as he has had a nasty touch on the head."

"Arm broken!" cried Mrs. Crosbie, in alarm. "But it must be set! I will send for Doctor Metcalf at once!"

"You can send for the doctor, if you like," Sir Douglas remarked, as he drew Stuart up the stairs; "but his arm is already set. I have had considerable experience in such cases, and I can assure you it is all right."

Stuart smiled faintly at his mother, and she followed him up the stairs, a little annoyed, a little anxious, and, oddly enough, a little glad—annoyed because Sir Douglas had taken so much upon himself, anxious for her son, whom she loved better than anything on earth, and glad, because she saw in this illness a chance of bringing about the marriage between Vane and Stuart which she so much desired.

Sir Douglas left the mother and son together when he

had ensconced his patient comfortably in a large chair; and Mrs. Crosbie busied herself with many little offices about the room, quitting the apartment only when she saw Stuart's eyes close in slumber. She met Vane on the landing, and, with an affectionate glance, drew the girl's hand through her arm.

"He is resting, dear," she said; "so I shall leave him for awhile. We must nurse him together, and we shall soon get him well."

Vane's face flushed a little.

"I will help you gladly," she returned, and she spoke honestly. Her first thought, like her aunt's, had been that this would bring Stuart and herself more together. She had another duty to perform too. She must ingratiate herself with Sir Douglas Gerant, and try by every means in her power to wipe away the memory of her foolish mistake.

Stuart slept for an hour or two, and dreamed of Margery, but when he woke the pain in his arm was so great that even her sweet image was banished from his thoughts. His mother came in as night fell, but Stuart was too ill to broach the subject of his love. The blow on the head was more severe than he had imagined, and he grew feverish as the day declined. He heard the tower clock chime the night hours, and whenever he moved his head, his eyes rested on the figure of Sir Douglas reading by the window, and ready at any moment to tend him.

And at the small cottage by the Weald another being sat and watched by a sick-bed, watched with a heart that was growing sadder and sadder as the moments passed. Margery, still in the white cotton gown that she wore when she plighted her troth, knelt by Mary Morris's couch, trying to alleviate the pain that was racking the poor wasted frame. She was ignorant of her lover's illness, and she thought of him only with a sense of peace and happiness. What a long wonderful day it had been, she thought, as she sat beside the little window and watched the veil of night darken the sky—a day in which her girlhood was buried forever, a day in which the golden glory of all earthly happiness dawned for her! She turned from the window to watch the sick woman. The paroxysm of pain seemed past, and she was asleep. The house was quiet as a tomb. In another room the loving, faithful husband and com-

panion was lost to trouble in slumber. Margery was alone: she moved softly to the window and drew back the curtains, and immediately the room was bathed in the silver radiance of the moon.

She stood and gazed on at the dark-blue heavens, the glittering myriads of jeweled stars, the moonlit earth, till a cloud seemed to obscure her vision; and, when she gazed again, the stars were gone and a ruddy haze pierced by the sun's golden beams illumined the sky.

She rose softly, moved on tiptoe to the bed, then, with a sudden shudder, dropped on her knees beside it. While her eyes had been closed in sleep, while the dawn had spread its roseate veil over the night, a spirit had flown from earth—Mary Morris was dead!

CHAPTER IX.

THE days passed away, and Stuart Crosbie gradually recovered from the effects of his fall. Despite the assurance from Sir Douglas that her son was doing well, Mrs. Crosbie satisfied herself, and summoned the village doctor, together with a fashionable physician from town, only to receive the same opinion from them, coupled with the expression that Stuart could not have been better treated. The young man passed four days in his room; but, as the pain left his head, he insisted on donning his clothes and descending to the garden. His mind was haunted by Margery's image and the thought of her sorrow; for the news of Mrs. Morris's death had reached him through his servant, and he longed to rush away and comfort his darling. He had seen little of his mother during the past four days; Sir Douglas had constituted himself head-nurse, and Mrs. Crosbie, who was not quite at home in a sick-room, gave way to him with a little annoyance and jealousy, though she would not let it be seen. Stuart had not been sufficiently well, during the short time she visited him, to speak about Margery—indeed, he scarcely had strength to reply to her inquiries—the heat was still very great, and, although he had an excellent constitution, he was considerably weakened by the fever and pain. But, though he could not collect his ideas to speak of Margery, she was never absent from his thoughts. The vision of her sweet blue eyes, her

wistful, lovely face, haunted his bedside, bringing a sense of peace and rest to his troubled dreams.

At last, after four days had passed, Stuart insisted on leaving his room and seeking the air, urged, in fact, by a strong desire to see his mother and tell her of his love. Sir Douglas offered no opposition to this move; the severer effects of the fall were now passed, and, with such health and vigor as Stuart possessed, his arm would soon heal. Nevertheless it was a rather shattered likeness of the handsome cousin that greeted Vane Charteris's eyes as she crossed the hall and saw him making slow progress down the stairs.

"Let me help you," she said gently, moving forward at once, and putting out her hand.

"Thanks. I am rather shaky," returned Stuart, smiling faintly. "How do you do, Cousin Vane? Thanks for all your kind messages."

Vane made no reply, but helped him down the stairs, across the hall to the colonnade, and, pushing forward a large chair, she soon made him comfortable.

"Thank you," he said again; "you are very kind. Is my mother anywhere about?"

"She has gone to Chesterham on some missionary business," replied Vane, leaning back against one of the white pillars, and looking extremely pretty and graceful in her long soft pink gown. "I don't think she knew that you were coming down, or I am sure she would not have gone."

Stuart sat silent, troubled and disappointed. He had braced himself for his interview with his mother; he was longing to send some word or sign to Margery. Four whole long days had passed since their picnic in the wood. and during that time sorrow had come to her, and he had not ministered to her comfort. He wondered whether she knew of his illness, whether she realized that it was that illness alone that had kept him silent. He had determined, as he rose, to speak to his mother, and then drive over to the Weald cottage and bring Margery back in all dignity to the castle, as befitted his future wife; but now again fate was unkind, his mother was absent—might be absent the whole day—and he was too weak to crawl even to the carriage. What could he do? He must send some message of comfort, some word of love to Margery. His

eyes fell on his maimed hand; and, with a half groan, he realized that he was helpless, utterly helpless to do as he wished.

Vane Charteris watched him carefully. She saw his brow contract and the look of trouble gather on his face.

"Are you in pain?" she asked gently.

Stuart woke from his musings.

"My arm is a little troublesome," he replied evasively; then, collecting his thoughts with an effort, he said, "But I must not be selfish, Vane. You will find it dull work sitting with an invalid. I feel so angry with myself for being so clumsy. Just fancy, Vane—this is the first time I have been ill in my life!"

"Then we must do our best to cheer you, Cousin Stuart," Vane responded, a faint color mounting to her cheeks at the last words. What could they mean but that this illness kept him from her side? "Come," she added brightly—"let me amuse you, read to you or do something. I assure you, Cousin Stuart, I consider it a pleasure. I would do anything for you, believe me."

Stuart looked at her as she drew up another chair and sunk into it, giving him a frank affectionate glance. A sudden thought flashed into his mind, and then died away.

"You look upon me as useless," she observed, with a smile. "I mean to upset that theory altogether."

"Useless!" echoed Stuart. "Indeed, Vane, you are quite wrong."

"Then let me help you," Vane said suddenly. "I see plainly, Stuart, something is troubling you; it is not only the arm. Come—I shall begin to be jealous of Sir Douglas, to be afraid that you will trust in no one but him. Will you not let me be your friend as well as your cousin?"

Stuart half rose in his chair.

"My friend!" he repeated; then he sunk back again. "Yes, Vane, if you will be my friend."

"Friendship is not an empty term with me," Miss Charteris observed slowly. "Since you will let me be your friend, I must act as such. See"—extending her hand—"let us seal the contract—look upon me as your chum, your sister, as well as your friend and cousin."

Stuart grasped her hand.

"I will," he said quietly; "for I am in urgent need of a friend, especially just now."

He stopped and looked at her; she was watching him with an expression of frankness and sympathy.

"Vane," he began slowly, "I came down this morning on purpose to talk to my mother on a subject that is more than life to me. I anticipate—I know—I shall have a hard struggle with her, though, despite all she may say, I shall be firm. Will you help me in this struggle?"

Vane rose to her feet again; her breath was coming fast, and a presentiment of something disagreeable passed through her mind.

"Tell me what it is, Stuart," she said quietly, unfurling a large fan she carried, and holding it against the light, ostensibly to shield her face from the sun, in reality to keep it hidden from her cousin.

"Vane, do you remember the fourth day of your visit here, when I took you to see Sir Charles?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Do you remember a girl who was sitting in a corner and who brought me some water for the dog? I introduced her—Margery Daw."

Vane caught Stuart's eager glance, and her heart seemed to cease beating.

"Yes," she replied, a little coldly.

"Vane, that is my secret; that is the girl I love better than any one or anything in the world—Margery Daw."

Vane Charteris was silent for a minute. She felt as though her vexation and jealousy would choke her; then she forced herself to be firm and calm. She dropped her fan and moved out of the sunlight; her face was very pale, but she smiled as Stuart looked at her eagerly.

"Well," she said, quietly, "and—and you want me to help you—how?"

"You will?" he asked, with gladness on his face.

Vane put one hand on her chair for support.

"Am I not your friend?" she smiled faintly.

"Oh, thank you—thank you!" he cried, rising from his chair; but Vane gently pushed him back again.

"Tell me what you want," she urged, standing at his side, so that he could not see her pallor and annoyance.

"I want you to plead with me to my mother—not for myself—I am strong enough"—and Stuart drew himself up proudly—"I would face the whole world. I want you to be a friend to Margery, as you would be to me. She

may need your help; a woman such as you, Vane, can do much—smooth many difficulties. You can see how angry my mother will be. I shall not care for her anger; but Margery is so tender, so sweet, so proud—anger will humiliate and distress her; and, if you aid her, she will scarcely feel it, I am sure."

"Then you have not spoken to Aunt Constance yet?" Vane observed, very quietly. "I am afraid you will have great trouble. You see, Stuart, your—your wife will be of low station, and your mother is proud."

"We do not know what Margery's birth may be; but that does not affect me. I love her; she shall be my wife. Ah, you do not know her, Cousin Vane, or you would not have said that! There may be some mystery connected with her birth; but there is no stain on her. If ever there was a lady, she is one."

"Your news has surprised me, Stuart, I must confess," observed Miss Charteris, moving languidly from his side and sinking into her chair again; "but I shall prove my words. I am your friend—I will act as such. Yes; I will help you."

Stuart's face flushed, and he leaned forward and bent his lips to Vane's white hand.

"This is indeed good of you!" he exclaimed. "Vane, I can never thank you enough."

"Tell me what I must do," returned Miss Charteris, unfurling her fan again.

"Will you see Margery?" inquired Stuart, hurriedly.

"To-day?" asked Vane.

"Yes. Ah, Vane, think—four days have gone, she has had a great sorrow, and I have been tied to my bed, not able to see her, not even to write her a word! If you would go to her, tell her all is going well, that you will be her friend, you will make me so happy."

"I will go, Stuart," Vane said, quietly; "for your sake I will do all I can. No; do not thank me. Remember what I said just now—I would do anything for you. I will wait till it is a little cooler, then borrow Aunt Constance's ponies, and drive to the village." She hesitated. "Perhaps—perhaps Miss Daw may not like me?"

"Not like you!" cried Stuart, quickly. "She can not help herself. Dear Vane, how good you are! You do not know what a load you have taken off my mind. I dread-

ed, I feared that my poor darling would have been without a friend. Now she is secure. My mother loves you, and will be led by you. I shall speak to her the instant she returns, and then Margery can come here. Vane, I shall never, never forget your kindness!"

"You shall give me all your messages before I start," Miss Charteris replied. "Now let me read to you a little —you look tired. I shall not let you talk any more."

She smiled gently, and flitted away, leaving Stuart deep in happy thought. His spirits rose as the picture of a blissful future floated before him, and his heart was filled with gratitude toward Vane. Without her help, it would have been a hard fight; but now his fears were lessened, for his darling would have one stanch, true friend.

Sir Douglas Gerant, walking through the hall, glanced at the invalid lying back in the chair, his face illumined with the flood of happiness that thrilled him.

"You look better, Stuart," he said abruptly, approaching the young man.

"I am feeling splendid," Stuart replied heartily.

"Hum! What new remedy have you tried, may I ask?" Sir Douglas said, dryly.

"A new doctor has prescribed for me," Stuart said with a laugh, "and here she is. Cousin Vane, see how much good you have done me! Sir Douglas has complimented me with almost professional jealousy."

Miss Charteris smiled, and, seating herself, opened her book, while Sir Douglas retraced his steps through the hall to the front entrance, and walked thence across the sweep of lawn to the lodge gates.

"So the wind is in that quarter!" he mused, while a frown contracted his brow. "I am sorry and disappointed. He is a good lad, worthy of a better woman than that proud, selfish creature. Well, I am an old fool! The sooner I go from here the better. I shall grow too fond of Sholto's son if I stay much longer."

He walked briskly across the lawn, then turned into the avenue, and approached the gates. The sun was beating down on the hot, dusty lane, the lodge-keeper's wife was standing, her arms akimbo, talking to some one leaning wearily against the iron pillar.

"Good-morning, sir," she said, courtesying. "May I

make so bold as to ask how the young squire is this morning?"

"Better—much better," returned Sir Douglas.

"There, Margery—you hear?"—the woman turned again to the figure—"better. Lor', if there ain't that baby awake! Excuse me, sir;" and, dropping a hasty courtesy, Mrs. Clark rushed into the house.

"You have come to inquire after the young squire?" Sir Douglas began, addressing the slender black-robed girl in kindly tones.

The head was bent, the plain skirt was thick with dust; but there was about the young girl's figure an air of unspeakable grace, and a tress of the red-gold hair that shone beneath the black straw hat gleamed as a touch of wondrous color to the somber picture.

Margery raised her head.

"Yes, sir," she replied, and then stopped, almost in alarm. Sir Douglas had moved forward as his eyes rested on her face; his color faded to a deathly whiteness, and he almost staggered against the gate, his eyes still fixed on her wondering countenance.

"Who are you? What is your name?" he gasped, rather than spoke.

"Margery Daw," she answered, trembling a little with fear. Then seeing his head droop, she added quickly. "You are ill, sir; let me get you some water."

Sir Douglas put out a feeble hand.

"It is nothing—a spasm—the heat," he muttered; then he moved slowly to the lodge door and sunk upon the bench outside. "The heat," he murmured again, "and a ghost of the past!"

Margery went into the cottage, and returned with a glass of water. Sir Douglas took it from her and drank it eagerly.

"I have frightened you, child," he said abruptly. "Tell me"—he pressed one hand to his side—"you are called Margery Daw. Your mother—what of her?"

"I have no mother," Margery replied; and her lip trembled. "I am alone."

"You live here—have lived here always?" went on Sir Douglas quickly.

"All my life," she answered.

He sunk back in the seat again.

"It was but my thought," he murmured; "and yet how like, how like!"

"Are you better now?" asked Margery gently.

"Yes, child—yes"—he paused a little—"but I shall go no further." He rose slowly, his eyes wandering now and again to the girl's face. "But you—you look tired—what are you going to do?"

"Walk back to the village," Margery answered, with a sigh and a wistful glance in the direction of the Castle. So much sorrow had come to her since that happy day in Weald Wood that she seemed, indeed, faint and weary. She longed to see Stuart, to send him a few words; but her pride, her modesty, forbade it, and not until this morning could she summon up courage to walk to the lodge gates and inquire about him. She never doubted his constancy, nor did she look for any message from him. She knew of his suffering, and all her thought was for him. She turned away now, with a graceful inclination to Sir Douglas, and prepared to retrace her steps.

"You can not walk yet—you are not rested," he said, sharply. "Sit down awhile. This heat is enough to kill you."

Margery shook her head.

"Thank you; I must go. I only came to inquire after —after Mr. Stuart."

"He is in good hands," Sir Douglas remarked in his dry, cynical way. "I set his arm; but his heart requires another doctor, and his cousin has succeeded there. Ah, the village will see a wedding before long, child, unless I have lost my wits!" He was turning away when he suddenly approached her once more. "I must see you again," he said, in a strange, husky voice. "You have brought back a gleam of the past that was buried, touched the spring of a secret that has never seen life. There is a strange sense of hope within my heart—hope that I thought dead, never to be revived. Child, whoever you may be, remember that in the future, while I live, I will be a friend to you, for you bear an angel's face."

He turned and walked away rapidly; but Margery had neither heard nor understood what he meant. She was repeating over and over again the words he had uttered first, her heart grasped too clearly and terribly the meaning—a wedding in the village, a wedding from the castle! Stu-

art, her Stuart, the being who held her very life, marry another—that fair lovely woman who had laughed her to scorn! The sunshine grew blood-red before her eyes, for one instant she reeled, and then grasped the door-post for support. Then gradually she awoke to the fullness of her pain and humiliation. Pride was swelling in her heart; she seemed in that instant changed from a girl of glowing, living hopes to a woman who had tasted the bitterness of all earthly grief. She bent her head and walked steadily down the lane, heedless of the sun, heedless of the rough stones, heedless even of madame's presence, as she dashed past in her carriage. She was oblivious of everything save her pain and trouble, and the memory of her wasted love.

CHAPTER X.

"Friendship is constant in all other things,
Save in the office and affairs of love;
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let ev'ry eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent."

VANE CHARTERIS closed abruptly the book she was reading. She had commenced the quotation scarcely heeding what she read, but the sense dawned upon her as she reached the end. She colored faintly and looked up hurriedly, then gave a sigh of relief. Soothed by the musical monotony of her voice, Stuart had fallen into a doze, and the last words had had no meaning for him.

Vane opened her fan and sat back; her eyes were fixed on the lovely picture before her, but her thoughts were a tumult of anger, vexation, and jealousy. To find her plans upset, her hope of power pass from her in the very moment of its birth, was a bitter mortification. Her short dream of ambition was broken, and for what? A mere country-girl whose eyes had bewitched Stuart, and whose charm had beguiled the passing hour. A feeling of self-annoyance succeeded the vexation. Vane bit her lip and tapped the ground with her foot. What had she done? Promised to befriend and assist the very woman who had pushed her aside. She was a fool, the proud girl told herself, not to have laughed Stuart's tale of love to scorn. A few cold words might perchance have checked the ardor of his flame. Now it was too late; she had given her promise,

and she must meet this woman. A deeper flush spread over Vane's cheeks.

She shut her fan quickly, and looked curiously at her sleeping cousin. A thought had suddenly come into her mind. After all, she had not been so foolish, for was she not to meet Margery alone, with no other influence to work against hers? Could she not so manage as to rouse, say, if not the demon of jealousy, at least the spirit of pride? The girl had pride, Vane was compelled to admit—she had not forgotten Margery's dignity that day in the court-yard, nor the graceful *hauteur* and ease with which she had moved away. Wordy warfare was not unknown to Miss Charteris, and it would be strange indeed if she could not plant some poisoned arrows in this presumptuous country-girl's breast.

Stuart could not write a line—that was fortunate; he would not be able to leave the castle for three or four days at the least—that also was fortunate. Vane felt her spirits rise again, and her hatred, fanned by piqued vanity and jealousy, grew stronger and stronger.

Some vague thought of trouble seemed to come at that moment to Stuart, for, on turning her head, she met his open eyes fixed with an anxious look on her.

"You have had a delightful sleep," she said, rising, and moving toward him. "I am so glad!"

Stuart passed his left hand over his brow.

"How rude you must think me, Vane!" he murmured. "Your voice sent me to sleep; but I have not slumbered peacefully. My arm is a most annoying member."

"I feared you were suffering," Vane answered gently. "Stuart, why not go back to your room again? I am sure it will be wiser."

"I don't feel a Hercules, certainly," confessed Stuart. "Who could think that four days would pull a fellow down so low?" He rose slowly from his chair, then added suddenly, "But my mother! Vane! I must see her to-day."

"I am going to propose something," Vane said slowly, as she drew his hand through her arm. "Let me speak to Aunt Constance. Believe me, I shall do it far better than you. You would probably be hurt at what she says, and then you would both be angry. Now, if I speak, Stuart, I, being an impartial person, shall be more calm

and collected. I will plead your cause well, and—don't think me vain—I think I shall succeed as I wish."

Vane drew a quick breath. Stuart did not see the transitory gleam of triumph that flashed from her eyes.

"I am your friend; you will trust me?" she added gently.

"Trust you? Yes, Vane; but it seems cowardly, unmanly, not to plead for myself."

"Do you want to win your mother's consent? Yes, of course you do? Then be assured, Stuart, that in my hands you will be more certain of it than if you act for yourself. See—here is your servant! Take my advice, rest and be happy, and all will go well."

"Vane," began Stuart; but she stopped him.

"Do as I ask you," she pleaded; and with a smile of grateful thanks, Stuart retired to his room.

"All will go well—yes," mused Vane, as she turned back to the colonnade. "I see the end clearly now. I must enlist Aunt Constance on my side, and the rest will follow in due course. Margery Daw, your chance of reigning at Crosbie Castle grows smaller and smaller."

She mounted the stairs to her room, stopping on the way to exchange a few words and embraces with her mother, who was overjoyed to see her darling child so well and happy.

Vane made a careful, simple toilet; she exchanged her long pink gown for a dainty white cambric, chose a large white hat and gloves of a light tan shade, and, after bidding her maid place them in readiness, descended to the hall just as her aunt arrived.

Mrs. Crosbie was dismissing her groom with the ponies when Vane interrupted.

"Forgive me, auntie dear," she said lightly; "but may I have the carriage this afternoon? I have an errand to perform in the village."

Mrs. Crosbie looked surprised for an instant; then she said affably—

"Certainly, my dear. At what time shall Tims bring it round?"

"About five o'clock. Many thanks, Aunt Constance," she added, prettily, as Mrs. Crosbie gave the desired order.

Luncheon progressed slowly and rather silently. Lady Charteris chattered away to the squire, and Mrs. Crosbie

dilated in her proud cold way upon mission-work. Sir Douglas eat and spoke little, while Vane discussed the delicacies in silence.

Several times in the course of the meal she was struck by the strange expression on Sir Douglas Gerant's face; there was a glow of animation, a look of eagerness that surprised her, and she decided mentally that he was pondering some great problem, when she saw his brows darken and his jaw set with determination. She herself had many momentous thoughts troubling her; but her manner was placidly serene. She was awaiting her opportunity to speak alone with Mrs. Crosbie, and thought to effect her purpose immediately after luncheon.

In this however she was foiled; her aunt was claimed by the housekeeper on account of domestic affairs, and it was past four o'clock before she was liberated.

At last Vane saw her chance. She had seated herself in the colonnade, which was a favorite lounge for the whole house in summer-time, and from here she could see all who came and went. To outward appearance she was absorbed in her book; but in reality she was keenly alive to everything passing around, listening for the first tones of her aunt's voice, and wondering during the moments of her watch what was causing the struggle in Sir Douglas Gerant's breast as he walked to and fro beneath the shade of the trees in the distance.

Vane did not look up as she saw her aunt approach; but she gave Mrs. Crosbie a smile when she addressed her.

"So I hear, Vane, that you have been nursing Stuart, and with good results. I have just met Andrews, and he tells me his master has slept nearly all the afternoon; he will soon recover now, I hope."

"I hope so, indeed," said Vane, softly.

She pushed forward a chair as she spoke; then, as her aunt sunk into it, she said, quietly:

"Aunt Constance, I want to speak to you. I said before luncheon that I had an errand to perform in the village, but I did not say what that errand was. I will tell you now."

"Do you think I look curious, Vane?" laughed Mrs. Crosbie, her handsome features wearing an air of satisfaction and pleasure as her gaze rested on her niece.

"I am going to see Margery Daw," Vane said slowly,

letting her eyes wander across the sunlit lawn, but not before she saw a look of surprise dawn on her aunt's face.

"See Margery Daw!" repeated Mrs. Crosbie. "Why, Vane?"

"Because Stuart has asked me to go."

"Stuart!" breathed his mother, half rising from her chair. "What do you mean, Vane?"

"I mean, aunt, that Stuart loves Margery Daw, and says he will make her his wife."

For a time there was no reply from Mrs. Crosbie; and Vane, turning, saw a heavy frown on her handsome face.

"You are jesting, of course, Vane?" she said, at last.

"Indeed, Aunt Constance, I am not," returned Miss Charteris, quietly. "My news surprises you?"

"Surprises!" repeated Mrs. Crosbie. "I fail to understand you at all."

Vane rose and knelt beside her aunt.

"Auntie dear," she said gently, "you must not be hard on poor Stuart. Recollect, he has eyes, and this girl is beautiful. I have seen her, and love is—"

"Has he asked you to plead for him?" interrupted Mrs. Crosbie coldly.

"No; he told me his secret this morning, urged by I know not what," and Vane let her eyes wander away again. "Perhaps," she went on, after a brief pause, "some idea of the warm interest I must ever have in him prompted him; but that I can not tell. He spoke openly to me, and asked me to be her friend as I was his."

A sneer curled Mrs. Crosbie's lip.

"He evidently thought union was strength," she remarked dryly.

"Aunt Constance, I will not hear your anger against Stuart," Vane said quickly. "I—I am his friend, and—" Her head drooped and her cheeks flushed. Then she went on hurriedly, "It is not his fault—of that I am sure; you must blame Margery Daw, if you blame any one."

"Does he expect me to receive her?" asked Mrs. Crosbie quietly.

"I think so. But listen to me, Aunt Constance. I have not crossed Stuart, I have not refused his request, for I feared, in his weak state, to vex him; but he has left everything in my hands, and I will—" She stopped, and their eyes met.

"What?" asked Mrs. Crosbie almost sharply.

"Save him from this if I can."

The words were uttered very quietly; and Mrs. Crosbie drew a quick breath of relief.

"Vane," she said, "forgive me; I was wrong to doubt you, even for a moment."

"I know what it is," Vane went on hurriedly—"a glamour, a romance. Stuart has been here alone—he has been bewitched. But I know too what a bitter awakening it would be when the glamour was gone, the veil of poetry and romance torn down; and, for his sake, I will do it. Aunt Constance, do not think me bold—do not think me unwomanly. I can not help myself; I would do anything for Stuart—for—for I—love him!"

Vane sunk back and buried her face in her hands. Mrs. Crosbie put her arms around her niece and drew her to her shoulder.

"Unwomanly, Vane?" she said gently. "I honor you. This is as it should be."

"Ah, you will keep my secret, Aunt Constance? He must not know—I would not let him know for untold gold. If we succeed in satisfying this girl's ambition or avarice—money generally heals such wounds as hers—we must remember he will be troubled perhaps for a time. I would not let him think my heart hungered for him; my pride would suffer—it would kill me."

"He shall not know, I promise," Mrs. Crosbie responded, stroking Vane's soft hair. "But what shall we do—how break this off? It has taken me at a disadvantage; the very thought seems so monstrous, I can not yet believe it."

"I want you to humor Stuart," Vane said. "Let him think that you may consent eventually; be proud and cold, but not unkind. The blow must come from her."

"How?" inquired Mrs. Crosbie, for once roused from her calm demeanor.

"She must be convinced of the uselessness of her scheme. I am going to her now, sent as Stuart's messenger. I think I shall pave the way at any rate."

Mrs. Crosbie clasped her niece's hand for an instant, and then turned aside.

"It is very bitter to me, Vane, to have to stoop to deceit; but it is a deep wound to my pride, that Stuart, my son, should so far forget his dignity as to think of such a

girl for his wife. You are prompted by the best and noblest feelings, Vane; but I can not bring myself to submit to this degradation even for a minute. Stuart must know the truth—must know how I judge him in this."

Vane rose hurriedly from her seat.

"I know you are right, Aunt Constance," she responded quietly, though she was inwardly disturbed by Mrs. Crosbie's words; "but consider. Stuart is impulsive, as strong-willed as yourself, if you cross him in this, who knows but that he may do something rash—perhaps marry the girl without delay, and be separated from you forever? Is it not wiser to act cautiously, to be careful and politic? I do not advocate too much warmth on your part; meet Stuart coldly, but at the same time throw no obstacle in the way. Believe me, dear auntie, you will be relieved of all anxiety if you do this."

"But what do you propose?" asked Mrs. Crosbie, resuming her seat, and Vane saw that her advice had taken root.

"We must let the separation come from her," she answered, quickly. "It will not do to send the girl away—that would be but a stimulus to Stuart's determination. No; he must be disillusioned; and that will not be a difficult matter, I should imagine."

Mrs. Crrosbie was silent for a few moments; she was irritated and displeased more than Stuart imagined she would be at the news of his attachment. To her it seemed incredible that a Crosbie should stoop to humiliate himself in this way. Vane's words fell with good effect upon her ears. Had her niece not been at hand to smooth matters with gentle tact, she would not have been able to restrain her anger. Something of the wisdom of the girl's advice came home to her as she mused. She saw that Vane was urged by jealousy and pride to break off this terrible connection, but she was quite wrong in her conclusions as to the source of that jealousy. She judged it to be solely the outcome of love for her son, and the thought came as soothing balm at such a moment. Once let them dispatch that girl, and the marriage she had planned would take place.

Vane watched her aunt intently.

"You will consent?" she said softly, breaking the silence.

"Yes," Mrs. Crosbie answered abruptly.

Vane made no immediate reply, but her heart thrilled with satisfaction. Now she must conjure up all her power to defeat Margery Daw. Plan after plan followed each other through her mind; but she could arrive at none better than trampling on this village rival's dignity and wounding her pride with darts the sting of which would linger longest. Before she began the fray however she must see Stuart, breathe in his ear that she had succeeded with his mother, and thus allay any suspicion he might entertain in the future that it was through her instrumentality that his love-dream had been broken.

"Yes," said Mrs. Crosbie again, "I will act as you suggest. I see plainly the wisdom of such a course. Were I to display the anger I feel, the consequences might be worse than the present state of things. At all hazards we must separate him from this girl!"

Vane bent, and kissed her aunt.

"I am glad you see the matter as I do. Aunt Constance, I feel I am right. Stuart must be saved from this; and, if we work well, we shall do it. Now I must start for the village. Remember, we will not let your anger be seen."

"It will be difficult, perhaps," returned Mrs. Crosbie; "but there is too much at stake, and I will control myself."

Vane moved away slowly, leaving the mother plunged in bitter thought, and mounted the stairs to her room. She put on her pretty hat, smiling triumphantly at her own image in the mirror, and drawing on her gloves, passed along the corridor till she reached Stuart's door.

She knocked softly, and whispered to the servant—

"Is your master awake?"

"Yes, miss."

"Ask him to come to the door for one minute, if he can."

Vane fastened the last button of her glove, and then stood waiting, a picture of grace and beauty, as Stuart moved slowly into the door-way.

"I am going now," she said, gently; "but, before I start, I wanted to let you know that I have succeeded with Aunt Constance. She—"

"She agrees?" interrupted Stuart, resting against the door for support.

"Yes; but," continued Vane, "you must not be surprised if she is cold and hard. Of course she was totally unprepared for my news. I expect she will come and see you directly. Now will you trust me again, Stuart?"

"Trust!" he echoed, putting out his hand. "I have no words to thank you with, Vane. Margery and I owe all our happiness to you."

"I thought I would tell you; and now I must go," Miss Charteris said hurriedly. "You look pale, Stuart."

"My head aches confoundedly! I beg your pardon, Vane, but I am not used to pain, and I grow impatient. Tell Margery— But I leave it all to you. Thank you again and again."

Vane descended the stairs rapidly; and she felt as she seated herself in the smart pony-carriage that she had fought half her battle, and that, with a little care and discrimination, the victory would be easily and gracefully won.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONG the hot road, and through the village, where her strange dazed look awoke wonder in the women's minds, and set their tongues wagging in pity, toiled Margery. She was filled with but one thought, one terrible thought, which chilled her heart and roused her pride. Stuart Crosbie had deceived her; he had deliberately sought her, and—a blush dyed her cheeks at the remembrance—won her love, her pure, innocent love, by false vows, which were laughed to scorn perchance with his cousin when he had left her. She did not doubt the truth of the words she had just heard; they had been spoken so naturally, the outcome of the speaker's knowledge. Had he not seen the lovers together? Was he not in the house, with every opportunity of judging? Now all was explained. Stuart had made his accident a pretext for leaving her in her sorrow without word or sign. Her youth, her joy, her light of life was gone, and henceforth she was alone in the world. Her heart raised a cry against this man. Why had he sought her? Why had he ruthlessly

broken the charm of childhood, and given her the sorrows of a woman? Why not have left her in her innocence, content in her humble life?

During the past three months Margery had lived in an atmosphere of indescribable happiness. She did not stop to reason with herself as to whether Stuart Crosbie's comings and goings had not an unspeakable interest for her. She had welcomed him as her friend, the dearest in truth she possessed, until the day in Weald Wood, and then what joy filled her being! Stuart loved her. The truth was revealed to her; the key to her contentment—her joyous spirits never saddened save when by the sick woman's couch—was grasped. And now all was at an end. An indescribable pain pierced her heart; she never realized till now how deeply her affections were centered in him. Her shamed modesty resented the wound he had inflicted. She recalled the words she had spoken, the looks she had given, the kisses he had stolen from her lips, and at each thought she grew fainter and pressed her small hands against her heart to stay its throbbings. She could think of nothing but the two figures standing in Weald Wood, with the sunshine overhead; and the picture brought a flush of shame to her face, a weight of unspeakable grief to her heart.

She reached the cottage gate at last, and advanced wearily to the door. The reality of Mrs. Morris's death came to her then in all its bitter force. In all the days of her childhood, when trouble had overtaken her, she had sought the gentle woman whose couch now stood blank and empty, and had found solace in her soothing love. Now she had none to whom she could turn, none to bring her peace.

She threw off her hat, and, suddenly flinging herself upon the couch, gave way to a flood of passionate tears. A thousand thoughts coursed through her mind. Was this the cross of her life? Was all that was beautiful and happy gone forever from her? Was her lot henceforth to be but sorrow and tears? Her spirit recoiled from the vision of grief. Some lines she had read a week before rose to her lips with an agony of despair—

"O God, I am so young, so young!
I am not used to tears at night
Instead of slumber, nor to pray'r
With sobbing lips and hands outwrung;"

and, uttering a bitter cry, Margery buried her face in her hands till the paroxysm was passed.

Fatigue and sorrow had told upon her, and she rose from her knees looking, with her white tear-stained face, the ghost of the lovely girl of a week before. Her tears had relieved her, the dull pain at her heart was gone; but the passion of her grief had weakened her, and for many minutes she lay back in a chair, the faint breeze stirring the curls on her forehead.

Presently the sound of footsteps aroused her, and, looking up, she saw Reuben Morris enter the garden, accompanied by a young man who, despite his handsome face, was certainly of a plebeian stamp. The two men were talking earnestly; and Margery noticed with a pang the stoop in the sturdy shoulders, the worn face of the bereaved man. She had always loved him, though the link that bound her to the dead woman was wanting in her affection for him; and she forgot her own sorrow for the moment in thinking of his.

She was leaning back in the shadow, and neither perceived her; but her ears caught her own name; and, too weary to move, she remained in her seat.

"Then you have not spoken to Margery yet?" she heard the young man question.

"No; but I shall do it afore night-time. I can not bear to think of quitting her, poor lamb! But there's many here as'll be good to her, and I can not stay in the place; it would kill me."

"You will be a loss, Morris," returned the stranger. "Have you sent word to Sir Hubert's steward about going?"

"I've just come from him. He spoke very kindly, and tried to persuade me to stay on; but my mind is fixed, and I was firm. Sir Hubert and my lady are not coming home, after all, he tells me, for which I am sorry, as Margery would—"

Margery rose and moved into the door-way, holding out her hand to the speaker.

"I have heard what you have been saying, Dad Reuben"—calling him by the name she had given him when she was a child.

Reuben Morris drew her toward him.

"My poor lass!" he said, gently. "How worn and

tired you look! I meant to ha' spoken to you to-night, Margery."

"Tell me now," she urged, giving her hand to the young man.

"I am going away, Margery," Reuben replied. "I can not stay here. The sight of all she loved would kill me; so I am just going to leave it all; and I start for Australia at the end of the week. I have been up to Farmer Bright's, and Mr. Robert has walked back with me to talk it all over."

"Australia!" repeated Margery, drawing closer to him. "So soon!"

"Yes, lass; I must go. I have had an offer through Farmer Bright to go up country to a man who wants a stock-driver. It isn't money that takes me, Margery. I must quit Hurstley, or I shall go mad. But we must think of you, lass?"

"I shall be all right," Margery said, quietly. "I have many friends; Sir Hubert's steward will find me another home till Lady Coningham comes back, and—"

"Yes; my mother has sent me here with a message to you, Margery," Robert Bright said quickly. "She wants you to come to her for a month or so."

"She is very kind."

"Wilt thou go, lass?" asked Reuben, gently.

Margery drew a quick breath.

"I can not answer now," she said; "to-morrow I will tell you, Mr. Robert."

"Oh, there is no hurry," Robert returned, heartily. "Mother will welcome you gladly whenever you come."

"Wait till to-morrow, and she'll be with you," Reuben said in the young man's ear, as Margery turned in-doors again; then he added, in a louder tone, "I must go up to the Weald for an hour, to see the men. Get thee some rest, lass."

"I will stay here, if Margery will let me," Robert Bright said, putting one foot on the door-step, and glancing into the room.

Reuben had moved away down the path, and the sight of the girl's pale, drawn face, and listless, drooping figure, stirred the heart of the young farmer. For weeks past he had grown to watch for this girl. Her rare beauty and daintiness were as something heavenly in his every-day life.

"You must not fret, Margery," he said, as kindly as he could; sympathy, always difficult to him, was almost impossible now. "You are looking very pale and ill."

The girl raised her hands, and pressed them over her hot eyes; then she rose with a faint smile, and drew nearer to the door, leaning back against it with a weary little sigh.

"I am very tired," she said wistfully, "and the heat tries me."

"Come to my mother, and she will nurse you; you do not know what a clever doctor she is. Come! Let me take you away with me—I will borrow a cart from some one in the village. Do come, Margery!"

Margery shook her head.

"I can not go," she answered slowly. "Do not think me unkind; I can not go."

His face fell, and there was silence between them for a few minutes. Her heavily fringed lids drooped over her eyes, and so he gazed, whilst the love raging within his heart urged him to take this frail sad being from sorrow to happiness. Suddenly it grew too much for him, and, putting out his hands, he grasped hers tenderly.

"Margery," he said—"my darling!"

Margery tremblingly withdrew her hands, and her eyes met his glowing ones, with horror and distress in their depths. She had never dreamed of this. She had liked Robert, thinking him a cheery, kind-hearted man; but love—love from him, when every pulse in her beat only for Stuart! It was a horror—a sacrilege!

Robert Bright saw her slight shudder, and he tried once more to grasp her hands.

"Forgive me, Margery," he said hurriedly. "I would not have spoken so soon, but something within me forced me to do so. I could not bear to see you looking so pale and ill. You want comfort now, and so I spoke. Margery, I love you! My darling, don't be frightened. Perhaps I am rough; but I love truly—you can not know how truly, Margery!"

But she had drawn back, and, with her face buried in her hands, had sunk into her chair again. As she felt his touch on her shoulder, her hands dropped, but her head was still lowered.

"You must not say such words," she said faintly.

"Dear Mr. Robert, forgive me, but—but I can not hear them. I—"

"I am a brute to tease you," he broke in, quickly; "but, oh, Margery, I am not sane just now! I love you so dearly; give me one kind word."

"I can not, I can not!" she cried. "You must not hope. Mr. Robert, I—"

"Not hope!" he repeated, blankly. "Not hope! Do you mean that, Margery?"

"Yes," she answered, putting one hand to her heart to check its tumultuous throbbings. "Yes; I mean it. I like you—you are so good; but love—"

The sadness of her accents touched him.

"Then forget it all," he said, huskily. "Love does not kill. I shall get over it. And yet—" He hesitated, looked once more at her drooping figure, and then went on hurriedly: "Don't let this stop you from going to my mother, if you care to do so. I have to run up to London to-night. We should not meet."

Margery rose and held out her hands to him. In an instant he had them pressed to his breast, his eyes fixed on her face; but there was no indication of what he sought in her pallid cheeks and trembling lips. He loosened his grasp.

"Then," he said, slowly, "there is no hope, Margery?"

"None," she murmured, faintly.

Robert Bright pressed his lips to her hands, and the next minute she heard his step grow fainter and fainter along the path, and then the click of the gate told that he was gone.

Margery sat on, dazed, almost stupefied. Then gradually memory came back to her, bringing, in all its bitterness, the old pain of the morning, with a fresh pang of sorrow for the man who had just left her. She felt as though she had been cruel to him. He had been so earnest, so eager, and yet there was no hope. No hope! Her heart echoed the dismal words. Life that had been so bright and beautiful was now dark and drear as winter gloom. She sat on, heedless of time's flight, vaguely watching the sun touch the trees with its afternoon gold, and sadly musing on the dark mysterious future that stretched before her. At last she woke from her sad thoughts. The click

of the gate had caught her ear, and she realized that the afternoon was nearly gone.

"It is Dad Reuben!" she murmured; and rising, she dragged herself from the chair and stood, looking pale and ill, as a shadow fell over the door-way.

CHAPTER XII.

"YOU are Margery Daw?"

A cold voice fell on Margery's ear. She turned, and her eyes rested on Vane Charteris, looking inexpressibly lovely and graceful in her white toilet. She looked steadily at Margery, noting with secret pleasure her worn, tear-stained face and dusty disheveled appearance.

"I retract my first opinion," she said to herself; "the girl is absolutely plain."

Some vague instinct called Margery's pride to arms. This woman hated her, she felt, though their eyes had met but once before. She drew herself up, and, resting one hand on her chair, faced her unwelcome guest. What had brought her to the cottage? Margery felt her limbs trembling; but her face showed no sign of the agony in her heart.

"Yes," she said steadily, "I am Margery Daw. Do you wish—"

"First, let me express my sympathy for you in your loss," commenced Vane, modulating her voice to soft accents. She saw at once that Margery regarded her as an enemy; but she did not intend to allow that thought to become rooted. She must clothe her darts with kindness, and with her sweetest words thrust her dagger into this girl's heart. "None can know but those who have suffered what your grief must be," she finished gently.

Margery's head drooped. Had sorrow already destroyed all her good impulses? She was prepared for war, and she met with sympathy, almost tenderness!

"You are very good," she faltered.

Vane advanced into the room and pulled forward a chair.

"May I sit with you for awhile?" she asked. "It is not good for you to be alone like this."

"I like it," answered Margery, turning her lustrous eyes upon her guest; and, as Vane saw their beauty, her brows contracted, and she realized that her first judgment regarding this girl had been right, after all.

Her mood changed. When she had considered Margery plain, a half-contemptuous thought had passed through her mind to wound yet retain her sweetness. Now she felt she cared not how hard she struck to relieve the jealousy and dislike that rankled in her bosom.

She leaned back languidly in her chair; and somehow the thought struck Margery that she had never seen the little room look so small and shabby before. The delicate gleam of Vane's white garments contrasted strongly with her own dingy, dust-stained black dress, the placid beauty of Miss Charteris's face brought back the thrill of pain to her heart. How different they were! Who was she, to compete with such a woman? She roused herself from her thoughts as she met Vane's cold clear eyes watching her.

"I beg your pardon," she said quickly, yet with unspeakable grace. "You have had a long drive; may I give you a cup of tea—or perhaps you would prefer some milk?"

She moved toward an inner room; but Vane stopped her.

"Neither, thank you," she replied coldly—she was growing more and more annoyed every moment. She was being treated with every courtesy, with all regard for etiquette, as though her hostess were a duchess instead of a common village girl! It was insupportable; she must hasten to break down that calm exterior which irritated her beyond measure. "Neither, thank you," she repeated; "I shall not stay long. It is, as you say, a tedious drive; but my cousin, Stuart Crosbie, wished me to see you."

She bent her head to look at her flounce, but not before she had seen the girl's slight frame wince and her cheeks grow paler.

"That shot went home!" she told herself.

Margery stood immovable, her hand still grasping the chair. A few moments before she had thought it impossible to suffer greater mental pain than she had endured; now she was experiencing pangs still greater, for her wound was being probed. Weak, faint from want of food as she was, she determined to be brave, to stand firm before this woman—her rival.

"I scarcely know how to begin," continued Vane, with well-assumed kindness and concern. "It is a delicate subject; yet I could not well refuse Stuart." She hesitated for an instant, then held out her well-gloved hand. "Miss

Daw," she said impulsively, "will you forgive me if anything I may say in the course of our conversation should vex you? I would not indeed willingly cause you any pain."

Margery's eyes were fixed on the golden-tinted trees beyond the garden; she did not notice the outstretched hand.

"Why should you cause me pain?" she asked, in reply. "There is nothing in common between you and me."

Vane let her hand drop to her side; her face flushed. Could she never shake this girl's control?

"I am glad you judge me rightly," she responded, "for I am and have been much distressed by my errand. Stuart has asked me, Miss Daw, to express to you his sincere sympathy in the loss you have sustained by the death of Mrs. Morris. He begs me to tell you that he trusts you will apply at the castle now that you are left without a guardian. He has enlisted his mother's good-will on your behalf, and he sends you this small sum to assist toward anything you may require."

She held out a small packet as she finished, and had the satisfaction of seeing Margery's lips twitch as with sudden pain, and her whole frame shake with passion beneath the insult.

"It was his intention to write to you as far back as last Thursday," went on Vane; "but he had the misfortune to break his right arm, and writing was impossible; therefore, as he thought you would require some explanation from him, he asked me to come."

"I thank you," fell from Margery's lips in cold strained tones.

"Then I may leave this?" Vane said interrogatively, rising and placing the packet on the table. "And you will promise to apply at the castle with respect to anything concerning your future? I believe, but I am not sure, that Mrs. Crosbie has already written to some lady about a situation for you as maid."

Margery made no answer, and Miss Charteris waited a few moments, and then moved to the door, feeling strangely uncomfortable, and by no means victorious. She looked back as she stood at the door.

"You have no reply?" she asked.

"Mr. Crosbie's explanation requires none," Margery answered, still in the same cold even tones.

"Then I will wish you good-afternoon."

"Stay!" cried Margery; and Vane turned toward her. "You have forgotten your packet," Margery added, pointing to the table.

Vane took it up without a word. Then a thought seemed to strike her, and she turned the money round and round in her hand hurriedly.

"Perhaps you will write to Stuart or to his mother?"

Margery's eyes met Vane's in an unflinching gaze.

"Write!" she repeated, with unutterable scorn and pride in the word. "There is indeed little in common between us. Such a question deserves no answer."

Vane's brows contracted. She turned and walked quickly to the carriage, and, entering it, drove swiftly away. Her musings were not altogether pleasant during the first mile or so of her return journey. She had succeeded, and succeeded so well that she need never fear Margery Daw again; yet her spirit was vexed even at her victory, for, though she had forever separated Stuart and this girl, she had not lowered her rival to the dust, as she had intended.

This thought rankled for some time; then her mind wandered to the more important matter of dealing with Stuart. She had no settled plan; but, as he was still so unwell, there would be a day or two yet in which to arrange matters. For the present she must satisfy him with loving messages, and explain that Margery was too distressed by her grief to accompany her back to the castle. She must see her aunt immediately, and get her to use her influence in some way to have the girl sent from the village. It would never do to risk a meeting between Stuart and Margery, for though she judged the girl to be too honest to say much, if indeed her pride would allow her to notice him at all, there would be sufficient to fire Stuart's anger and determination to learn the truth; and then—

Vane's face flushed at the thought of the humiliation she would undergo in such a case; and she registered a vow that she would never permit it to happen. Margery must go and at once.

Margery remained standing at the door as Vane walked down the path. She did not move as, in a dim way, she saw Miss Charteris settle herself in the dainty carriage, nor did she stir as the ponies started briskly from the gate. But, as the sound of their hoofs died away in the distance,

she woke with a shuddering sigh to the grossness of the insults that had been offered her. Suddenly her strength failed, and, with a groan, she sunk back on her chair, burying her face in her hands. The thought of her loneliness had been bitter, her lover's false vows had rankled in her breast; but the weight of Vane's humiliating words crushed her. It was almost greater than she could bear.

She tried to banish all tender recollection of Stuart from her, to think of him only as the one man who had darkened the glory of life for her, as the man who had plucked the sweet blossom of her love only to trample it under foot; but she could not succeed. Her mind would go back to those happy walks, those brief moments of gladness when they met, till it wandered to that day in Weald Wood, when, with her hand clasped in his, she had sworn to love him always, no matter what came between them. Yes, she loved him —would love him to the end; though he had deceived and injured her, though he had treated her with such scant courtesy and degraded her shamefully, her love was still the same.

She shook back her wealth of red-gold curls and rose to her feet; she was growing calmer. She reflected that she had yet to plan her future. She pushed the chair to the door-way and sunk into it. The sun was sinking behind the woods; the air was soft and balmy—its touch seemed like a kiss upon her cheek. The musical note of a bird twittering its "good-night" amid the leaves, the babble of the distant brook, soothed her. She leaned her weary head against the door, and began to think.

One idea stood out clearly—she must leave Hurstley. She dared not even picture to herself a future in the village where her eyes would rest on Stuart smiling on that cold, cruel woman—where she must sit down beneath a repetition of insult that had already roused her spirit almost to madness. No, there was no other course open to her—she must go, and soon. Ah, if she could but rush away at once, and let the veil of darkness cover her humiliation! But whither and to whom could she go? Reuben could not take her with him. Mrs. Bright would welcome her for awhile; but she could not meet Robert—poor Robert!

Like a flash of light in darkness came the remembrance of Miss Lawson, and the letter from her sister. Would it be too late? It was not a week ago. This must be her

chance. She rose hurriedly, her limbs trembling, and tied on her bonnet. She would go to Miss Lawson at once; the place might still be vacant; she might start perhaps in the morning! The thought lent her strength. She forced herself to eat some food, though every nerve in her body was quivering from excitement.

The simple viands, the glass of milk, seemed to put new life into her; she left a message for Reuben at the next cottage, and started in feverish haste for the rectory, losing all thought of fatigue in the rush of eager desire and hope that burned within her.

Miss Lawson was seated at her window, writing, when her eyes fell on Margery's figure coming rapidly up the path. The governess noted the girl's pale cheeks, her worn look of pain, and her heart thrilled with sympathy.

"Well, child?" she said, as the girl came in.

"Miss Lawson—" began Margery, and then her rapid walk told on her, and she half reeled to a chair.

The governess rose, untied the bonnet, and held a glass of water to her lips. She saw at a glance that something was wrong; but she asked no questions.

"You have walked too quickly, as usual, Margery," was all she observed as she turned away with the glass.

"I wanted to see you," murmured Margery; then, after a brief pause, she added slowly, "You remember what you said, Miss Lawson, that evening we parted—you would help me? I have come to claim that promise. I want—"

"Tell me what you want."

"I want what I refused that night—to leave Hurstley—go away altogether. Is it too late—oh, Miss Lawson, is it too late to go to that poor young lady?"

Miss Lawson looked at her keenly.

"No," she replied; "it is not too late. Strangely enough, I have heard from my sister again, urging me to persuade you. This letter I am writing is to her. I can tear it up."

Margery felt the first thrill of pleasure she had experienced during the long dreary day.

"And soon—I may go soon?" she asked.

"The sooner the better—in fact, to-morrow, if you can be ready."

"I could be ready to-night," Margery answered, with a weary sigh, pushing aside her curls.

"Then I will telegraph to my sister in the morning, when you start. I will go with you to Chesterham and see you into the train, and I think you had better get yourself one or two things when there; you can repay me out of your first quarter's salary."

Margery bent her lips to Miss Lawson's hand.

"I can never thank you sufficiently," she whispered; "you are too good to me."

Miss Lawson pulled away her hand with a jerk; but her face bore no trace of anger.

"Have you spoken to Reuben?" she asked.

"No; but I will at once. He leaves Hurstley himself at the end of the week."

"Well, I am heartily glad, child, you have decided on this. I think you will be happy."

"I shall be away from here, and that will be enough," was Margery's muttered thought.

"I will speak to Mrs. Carr to-night. She will spare me to-morrow, I know," continued Miss Lawson. "You must be ready about eight in the morning, Margery. Your luggage will not be much; perhaps you can arrange with Reuben to take it for you to the corner of the lane, and I will meet you there with the village fly."

"Thank you," said Margery again.

All was settled, and a feeling of peace stole into her breast. She would disappear—leave behind her everything that recalled her brief dream of bliss, her agony of grief. Stuart would be troubled no more with the sight of her sad face to dim his happiness. He had regarded her as a poor village girl, without heart, mind, or pride—a toy with which to while away the long, dull hours; and, as he had forgotten her—as she had gone from his memory—she would creep away in deed and in truth. She felt, as she sat in the twilight of the room that had seen her so often in her young, fresh content, that she would be satisfied if her name could be forgotten by Hurstley forever, if, with her departure, the veil of mystery that hung over her birth might envelop her in its folds, and she might be lost.

Miss Lawson, turning from her writing-desk, saw the plaintive look on the girl's face.

"What is it, Margery?" she asked abruptly.

Margery broke from her thoughts.

"I was wishing," she began, then hesitated, rose sud-

denly, and went and stood beside her governess, putting one little hand on the elder woman's. "You are so kind, so thoughtful," she said gently. "You ask me no questions, do not examine me as to why I have come to-night. I must leave Hurstley, and at once; there is a reason, but I can not tell you yet. Still you will believe me and trust me, will you not? Yes, yes, I know you will. I have only you to help me now in the whole world, and you will not fail me."

"You wish me to do something more?"

"I want to be lost to Hurstley. I want no one but you to know where I have gone. I want you to keep my secret."

Miss Lawson drew the girl into the fast-fading light, and scrutinized her face earnestly, almost sternly. The weary sadness in the beautiful eyes, the trembling lips, the wistful expression, told their tale. Miss Lawson was satisfied.

"Yes," she promised, "I will do as you wish—your secret shall be safe."

CHAPTER XIII.

IMMEDIATELY on her return to the castle, Vane Charteris sought her aunt, and whispered to her the success of her mission. Mrs. Crosbie willingly agreed to drive over early the next morning, and see what could be done with respect to dispatching Margery from the village; and Vane went up to her room, both satisfied and triumphant. Stuart's eagerness was fed by fictitious tender messages from Margery, which Vane uttered glibly and without the slightest effort; and so the first part of her plot proved most successful. She learned from her aunt that the mother and son had met, and that Mrs. Crosbie had carried out her part to the letter, thereby causing Stuart no little surprise and pleasure.

The news of Margery's disappearance came like a thunder-clap to Vane. She had never contemplated this *dénouement*, and was a little puzzled how next to act, until Mrs. Crosbie, in recounting the occurrences of her morning's drive, incidentally mentioned that she had met Mrs. Bright, who was in great distress about her son.

"What has happened to him, Aunt Constance?" asked Vane, with assumed indifference.

"I thought I said that he was in love with this girl—wished to marry her, in fact—and is so troubled at her refusal that he has determined to leave England."

"Ah!" ejaculated Vane, looking up suddenly, her cold blue eyes shining like stars. "Reuben Morris has gone to Australia, you say?"

"He starts at the end of the week; he left Hurstley for London this morning."

"And the girl is with him?" next queried Miss Charteris.

"She must be. The cottage is shut up, the key has been sent to the Weald, and the neighbors tell me they saw both the man and the girl leave early this morning."

"Could Mrs. Bright give you no clew as to where her son has gone, or intends to go?"

"None. She gave me his note to read, in which he merely says hesh all leave England for awhile. This girl has bewitched him. A marriage with him would have been the best she could expect—indeed, much too good for her," remarked Mrs. Crosbie, coldly. "What do you propose to do now, Vane?" she added rising.

"Nothing. I have finished. Aunt Constance, the game is ours. Do you not see that this young man has gone to Australia with them?"

Mrs. Crosbie removed her driving gloves slowly.

"I scarcely think that, Vane," she replied, "for Margery Daw has refused to become his wife. His mother is highly incensed and greatly troubled, poor creature, about it. No, I can not think that, Vane."

"It will prove to be the truth, nevertheless," Miss Charteris said, quietly; adding, "and, as such, it is welcome as a full and complete solution to a difficult and disagreeable question. Poor Stuart—I am sorry for him!"

Mrs. Crosbie glanced at her niece, leaning languidly against the open window, almost frail-looking in her delicate white gown, and could scarcely reconcile the strong, cold, relentless spirit with so lovely an exterior. For an instant a feeling of disgust at this girl's calm trickery and deceit, and at her own share in the matter, passed over her. Then her pride came to the rescue, and she consoled herself with the thought that Stuart had been saved from dishonor and trouble, and that Vane had done well. She bent and kissed her niece's delicate cheek.

"Yes, you are right," she said, thoughtfully. "The problem is solved, and you have done it. I can not thank you enough, Vane."

"Do not thank me at all," the girl whispered. "You know why I did it—it was my love for Stuart that prompted me. Some day he will thank me, perhaps. But for the present I fear he will suffer."

"With you near, Vane, that will not last," and with an affectionate glance, Mrs. Crosbie left the room.

The next day came, and Stuart still lived in his blissful dreams. Then with a rough hand they were ruthlessly shattered. Vane was reading in the colonnade that afternoon, when she heard hurried steps approaching, and, on looking up, saw Stuart, his face as white as his tennis-coat, beside her.

"What is it, Stuart?" she asked hurriedly.

"Vane, something has happened so strange and yet so absurd that, were I not so confoundedly weak, I should laugh at it. My man Andrews has just told me that Morris has left Hurstley—left early yesterday morning—for Australia, and Margery has gone with him. He declares it is true."

"True!" repeated Vane. "It is too absurd to credit for one instant. Stuart, how can you believe it?"

"The man is so positive," Stuart went on, with a sigh, resting his left hand on a chair for support, "that it quite staggered me. Of course there is some mistake; but it haunts me, nevertheless. Vane, will you drive me to the village?" he asked abruptly. "I must make inquiries."

"Willingly;" and Vane at once put down her book.

"How good you are!" exclaimed Stuart, trying to force a smile. "You are indeed a friend."

With a little laugh Vane put her hand on his lips and flitted away, while Stuart called to a gardener and ordered the pony-carriage to be brought round.

Vane was down again almost immediately, her face nearly as pale as her cousin's. It was but a few minutes before the carriage appeared, yet to Stuart they seemed hours. He tried to laugh at the absurdity of the report, yet a presentiment of trouble possessed him.

"It can not be, it can not be!" Vane heard him mutter again and again; and then he approached her.

"Tell me once more the messages she sent," he said

hurriedly; and Vane breathed the tender falsehoods in his ear, touching his agitated troubled spirit with their healing balm.

Sir Douglas Gerant passed through the hall just as they were starting.

"Whither away, wounded knight?" he asked lightly.

"To the village. I shall be back soon, Douglas." Then turning to his cousin, he said, "Drive fast, Vane."

With a puzzled brow Sir Douglas watched them disappear—he could not understand Stuart's apparent attachment to this selfish worldly girl—then, with a sigh, turned wearily in-doors. The next day was that fixed for his lawyer to come down from London, and he had much to occupy his thoughts. He sought the squire's room, and, in a chat over by-gone years, lost for awhile his anxious, restless expression.

Stuart sat silent beside his cousin as they bowled along the lane to the village; and Vane glanced now and again at his pale, pained face, wondering, when he knew the truth, what his opinion would be of her.

The village reached, he broke the silence by asking Vane to drive straight to the little cottage by the Weald; and, without a word, she complied. She drew up the ponies on the brow of the hill; and Stuart, heedless of his aching arm and weakness, alighted, and walked down to the gate he knew so well. It was just such an afternoon as that on which he had parted from Margery, and the memory of her beauty and sweetness lent strength to his faltering steps and fed the eagerness and desire in his heart. He pushed open the gate and entered. The window-blinds were drawn; the door—pushed with his one able hand—defied every effort. He grew faint and cold, and leaned against the door-post for a moment, while the roses nodding in the breeze seemed to whisper to him a sense of his loss in all its bitterness.

Margery was gone! But why—and whither? He turned and walked down the garden, his head drooping dejectedly on his breast. Margery gone! What could it mean? Why had she left him, without a word to sign, in the very moment of their joy and happiness? The truth did not come to him even then. There must be some mistake, he tried to convince himself. A hundred different answers to the strange question came to him. He closed the gate behind

him and turned away. There was a man standing at the gate of the next cottage, and at first Stuart determined to pass him; but a sudden impulse seized him, and he stopped and spoke with forced lightness.

"Ah, Carter—lovely weather for the crops! Is this true that I hear about Morris?"

"Good-arternoon, squire. Hope I see you better. It were a stiffish fall as you had. Morris, sir? What? That he's gone to Australia? Ay, sir—that's true enough."

Stuart's left hand grasped the gate.

"Rather sudden, isn't it?" he questioned, trying to clear his voice.

"Well, sir, it were rather; but you see the death of his missus fair knocked him over, and he made up his mind in a minute."

"And he has gone alone?" asked Stuart, every nerve in his body quivering.

"Oh no, sir! He's took Margery with him; and right sorry are we to part with her, I can tell you. She were just a sweet lass. Have you heard that Sir Hubert and my lady ain't coming home, after all, sir? Perhaps that's why Margery went, 'cos she belongs like to her ladyship—don't she, sir?"

Stuart murmured a few vague words in reply, and then passed on.

"Good-arternoon," said Carter; and then, as he watched the young man mount the hill, he muttered, "That there fall ain't done the young squire no good; he looks the ghost of hisself."

Vane sat silent as Stuart came toward her; even her cold, calculating heart was touched at the sight of his distress. He took his seat and sunk back against the cushions, looking deathly pale and worn. Vane gathered the reins together, and prepared to turn back to the castle; but Stuart stopped her.

"Drive to Chesterham," he said, in a quiet tone. "I must find out if they went to London."

Without a word she did as he wished, and in silence they sped along the lanes to the town. Vane was by no means comfortable during the drive, for she was beset by disagreeable thoughts. What if the girl, after all, had gone to London only to bid farewell to her adopted father? What more likely? Would she not have taken leave of the

neighbors and villagers had she started for so long a journey? What if, on their arrival at Chesterham, they came face to face with her? Vane grew cold and faint at the thought not only of the humiliation, but of such a termination to all her scheming. She set her teeth, and her face grew paler as she pictured his disgust when he learned the truth. It was so hasty, so strange a flight, that Vane, as she sat absorbed in deep thought, could not but feel that the chances were very much against her.

Stuart did not notice his cousin; he realized only that Margery was gone, his sweet love vanished. The joy of life for him was dead, and his heart was heavy with its pain. Hope now and then revived, but the vague presentiment that had hung over him since first he had learned the news crushed it as it was born.

As they approached Chesterham, Vane began to tremble, and the hands grasping the reins shook with fear.

"Draw up for a few minutes, Vane," Stuart said; "here is Bright—perhaps he can tell us something. Andrews said it was through his instrumentality that Morris had gone."

Vane checked the ponies and leaned back, feeling quite unnerved from the sudden reaction.

"Ah, Bright, you are the very man that I want to see," exclaimed Stuart, as the farmer rode up, "for you can tell me better than any one what I want to know."

"I shall be glad to oblige you, Mr. Stuart," returned Bright, turning an anxious face to the young man. "Perhaps you've heard about my boy Robert?" he added, full of his own troubles.

"No, I have not. Is anything the matter with him?" asked Stuart, his sympathy at once enlisted.

"It's nigh broke his mother's heart, sir; but he's gone off to Australia with Reuben Morris all of a sudden, without a word of warning."

Vane felt a thrill of joy pass through her, and her spirits at once began to revive.

"Australia? Why? But they can not have gone yet—they must be in London. It is one thing to say you will start on such a voyage, and another thing to do it. It takes two or three days, Bright, you know, to make the necessary arrangements."

The farmer looked at the young squire's flushed eager face with a little surprise and much gratitude.

"Thank you, sir. It's like you, Mr. Stuart, always to be kind; but it's no use now, sir. Robert started last night; by this time they're out of the Channel. It's a hard thing to see one's only son took from us, Mr. Stuart, and all along of a bit of a girl."

"A girl!" echoed Stuart, shivering, he scarcely knew why.

"Ay, sir—that lass of Morris's, that nameless thing! She just bewitched him, has played the fool with him, said him 'No,' when he'd have made her his wife, and now has took him on again, for they've all gone out together."

"Margery!" exclaimed Stuart, in a dull, startled way. "She—they have gone together?"

"Ay, sir—she've took him from us all with her fooling, and I make no doubt but they'll be married afore they reach the other side. The mother would have welcomed her gladly to keep Robert at home; but she weren't honest enough to do that—she must needs give herself airs like a fine lady, and drag my boy after her."

Vane saw Stuart's jaw set, his face flush, the veins on his forehead swell. After a pause, he said, in a low tone:

"And you are sure of this, Bright?"

"I'm just back from London, sir. I've been down to the docks, and there's no mistake; they all remembered the girl—her pretty face, they called it. Ah, it will be weary work for us, sir, waiting till Robert comes back! My wife's most distraught."

"Good-bye, Bright." Stuart put out his hand, which the farmer grasped. "This is indeed bad news! I am sorry, very sorry for you."

"Thanks, Mr. Stuart."

Bright loosened Stuart's hand, and with a respectful salute to Vane, passed on, something like a tear twinkling in his eye.

Vane looked straight ahead, pretending not to see the quick hurried way in which Stuart bent his head for a moment. Victory was hers, she told herself—victory! Suddenly Stuart looked up.

"Turn round, Vane, and drive home; it is all over now—so much the better!"

The recklessness of his tone pleased her; it showed her

that anger rankled as well as pain, that mortification filled his breast with despair. If this mood lasted, her work would not be difficult.

CHAPTER XIV.

"MARGERY! Margery!"

The light of the setting sun was gilding the branches of the few trees standing in the center of the square garden. A girl was sitting in a bay-window in one of the largest and gloomiest of the houses in the square, apparently watching the sunset; but really the sunset had no charm for her. She was so deep in thought that the sweet tones coming from the further end of the room did not reach her.

"Margery!"

The girl turned quickly, her musings disturbed by the touch of plaintive wistfulness in the last word.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Enid," she said, hurriedly, moving from the window.

"I am sorry to disturb your dreams, Margery," observed Lady Enid gently, "but I should like to sit up for awhile and no one can help me like you."

She smiled affectionately as she spoke, her beautiful dark eyes resting with pleasure on the figure of her young companion; she looked so dainty, so frail, yet so lovely, lying back on her cushions, that it was hard to imagine so fair a form was aught but perfect. It was an angel's face, pale and sweet, surrounded by short wavy locks of rich dark-brown hair, and lighted by a pair of luminous brown eyes.

Margery bent quickly and took away the silken coverlet from the couch, then, putting her arm under the slight figure, raised it easily into a sitting position; thence, after a moment's pause, she assisted the invalid to a large luxurious chair drawn close at hand.

"Thank you," said Lady Enid, as she reclined against the well-padded upright back. "How good you are, Margery! What should I do without you?"

Margery smiled, and, pushing up another chair, seated herself near the speaker.

Two months had passed since she left Hurstley, two long peaceful months; and, though she could not say she was

happy, she was content. She seemed in those eight weeks to have put all girlishness from her; her figure, in the simple gray gown that fitted to perfection, was already touched with the grace of a woman; her face, as lovely as of yore, bore, nevertheless, the traces of thought and the expression of a deep all-searching mind. She wore her red-gold tresses curled high on her small head, and this gave her a dignified and maturer air.

"Do not talk of my goodness," she answered lightly. "What are my little efforts, compared with all the kindness you have shown me?"

"You can not guess, Margery, how different my life has been since you came to me. Now don't shake your head! I can never say it often enough. Do you know, I had a presentiment that we should become friends the very instant Mrs. Fothergill mentioned your name? Margery Daw! There is a sweetness about it, a touch of romance. I was quite eager you should come, and I was so happy when the letter arrived saying that you would. I am afraid, dear," Lady Enid added, with a sigh, "that sometimes it is very lonely and dull for you here, with only a poor sick girl for company."

Margery slipped to her knees beside the slight form in its cardinal-colored silk wrapper.

"Never say that again—never," she said—"for I will not listen."

Lady Enid smiled; and Margery bent her lips to the thin white hand.

"Are you comfortable?" she asked, gently.

"Quite. Now stay here, Margery, and let us chat together. When the lamps come, I will hear you sing; but this is what I enjoy. I have been thinking to myself, as I lay on my couch, what a delight it would be to find out the truth about your poor young mother. How glad I should be if we could discover a clew!"

"I have given up all hope," Margery responded dreamily.

"Then it is wrong of you," Lady Enid said reprovingly, while she stroked Margery's soft curls caressingly. "I do not mean to do so if you do. I have thought of all sorts of plans; but the best of them all is to put the whole affair into Nugent's hands."

"But, dear Lady Enid, your brother, Lord Court, will have other and more important things to employ him."

"Nugent always does anything that gives me pleasure, and this would be pleasure indeed. You know, Margery, I have written so much about you; and only in his last letter he said he was so delighted to hear that I had at last secured a real friend and companion."

"He is very fond of you, I know," Margery responded softly. She knew that on the theme of this beloved brother Lady Enid would talk for hours, and she welcomed any subject that interested the poor young patient, being content herself to listen, for it banished more painful thoughts.

"Nugent has loved me as a father, mother, brother, all in one; we were left orphans so young; and oh, Margery, you could never fathom how dear he is to me! When I was well and could run about I can remember that my greatest treat was to have a holiday with Nugent. Then, when my illness came and I was crippled for life, it was Nugent who brought all the happiness, all the light into my existence. We were alone in the world, and he treasured me as the greatest jewel till—" Lady Enid paused. "Margery," she went on, after a brief silence, "I dare say you have often wondered why Nugent does not come home, why he has left me here so long alone?"

"I have sometimes," confessed Margery.

"And you have thought him unkind. Ah, I will not have him judged wrongly! I will tell you why he wanders abroad, leaves his old home and me, his little sister. Yes, I will tell you."

"If it pains you, do not speak of it," broke in Margery, seeing the pale face contract a little.

"It is dead and gone, and I need grieve no more. Nugent and I never speak of the past, but it will do me good to open my heart to you. When, as I have told you before, the doctors said I should be a cripple for life, I thought my brother's heart would break. He grew almost ill with trouble, and it was not until he saw that I was resigned and content that he recovered. He was so good to me then; no one was allowed to touch me but he; he lifted me and carried me from my couch to the chair or to the bed; he regulated his whole life and career by me. But for my illness he would have found a prominent place in

the Government, and doubtless have become a great man in the political world; but he renounced all his ambitions —everything for me. We were living then in our dear old home, Court Manor, of all Nugent's possessions the one we most cherished. I should like to take you there, Margery, to show you its quaint rooms and corridors, let you lose yourself in the pleasaunce and gardens. I was quite happy. Nugent never left me; together we read, studied, sung; we wanted nothing more than our two selves. Well, a day came that ended it all.

"Court Manor is in Westshire, in one of the most picturesque parts, and the village of Court consists of about half a dozen cottages and a tiny church. There are several country-houses about, and the one nearest to us is a large rambling old place called the Gill. This has been unoccupied, although richly furnished, for many years, the owner living abroad; but suddenly one morning we heard that the Gill was to have an occupant, and a few days later that occupant arrived. We neither saw now heard anything of the new neighbor, till one afternoon, as Nugent was reading to me, the lower gate clanged, sounds were heard on the gravel path, and a moment later a woman on horseback passed the window. She asked to be admitted to me; but I begged Nugent to excuse me, and he received her alone. I questioned him closely when the visitor was gone; but he gave me little information about her appearance, and only said, in rather a constrained way, that she was a widow—a Mrs. Yelverton—who had taken the Gill for the hunting season.

"I dismissed her from my mind, and life went on as usual for a few days; then it seemed to me that Nugent was out a great deal more than formerly. He was hurried, almost ill at ease, during our readings; and, when I asked him the reason, he at last confessed that Mrs. Yelverton had organized regular hunting-parties at her house, and had begged him to join them. I submitted gladly, for I had long thought the life was dull for him; and so the days passed on slowly, and we drifted gradually apart. I saw Mrs. Yelverton only once, and then I was almost dazzled by the brilliancy of her beauty. Her coloring was so rich, so vivid, that others paled beside her, and her eyes, of a most unprepossessing tawny shade, filled me with vague alarm. Apparently she did not care for me, for she never

repeated her visit; and I was left in peace till the end came.

"I will not linger over the rest, Margery; you can guess it. Nugent had grown to love her—he was bewitched by her beauty; and he whispered to me one evening that she had promised to become his wife. I tried to murmur words of happiness; but my heart failed me, and I could do nothing but look into his dear face with eyes that would speak my distress. Nugent left me that night, hurt at my coldness; but all thought of me was banished in the golden glory of his brief love-dream. Brief! It was but three months after his betrothal that his dream was shattered."

Lady Enid moved restlessly in her chair, and Margery, noticing her agitation, pressed tenderly the hot hands that were clasped together.

"Do not go on," she whispered; "it pains you."

"No, no! I like to tell you, dear," replied Lady Enid hurriedly. "Nugent was starting one morning to ride to the Gill; he had come into my room to kiss and greet me, and was eager to be gone, when the footman entered with a note. Nugent broke the seal and read it hurriedly, then, with a face like death, staggered to a chair. I begged in piteous tones that he would speak to me, tell me what had happened—for, alas! I could not move!—and after a while he thrust the note into my hands. It was from a man signing himself 'Roe,' stating that he had heard his wife was about to commit bigamy with the Earl of Court, under the assumed name of Mrs. Yelverton, and he warned Nugent against her in words that were more than forcible. I tried to speak to my brother; but his looks checked the words on my lips, and he strode out of the room, mounted his horse, and tore like a madman to the Gill.

"You can picture the misery of that day, Margery. I tossed and moaned alone—longing for, yet dreading Nugent's return. At last he came, and I heard the end—the agony in his face and voice would have wounded you to the quick, Margery. The woman was indeed Roe's wife, and, when Nugent reached the Gill, he found everything in the wildest confusion. The man and wife had had an interview in which he informed her that Lord Court knew the truth; and this so incensed her that she drew out a revolver and fired at him. Fortunately the bullet missed him, and the woman, finding herself baffled, fled. Roe told Nugent

the story of his miserable life. His wife had deserted him, destroyed his whole career. He described her as a desperate character and thoroughly abandoned. His words were true; for, Margery, it was discovered that she had gathered together all the treasures of the Gill, and would have eloped that very night with a man who had served her as groom during her stay there.

"Nugent seemed turned to stone when all was over; it almost killed me to see him wandering about listlessly, all happiness crushed out of his life. Then I spoke to him and tried to persuade him to go abroad, to leave Court Manor for a time. At first he would not listen to me; but, after awhile, the idea seemed to please him, and he went, leaving me alone and miserable, and I came here ostensibly to be under the London doctors. I have seen him only for a few days together in the four years that have passed since that time; but his letters of late have been brighter, and I live in the hope that he will return to me as he was before his life was clouded."

"It is a sad story," murmured Margery. She had risen, and was leaning against the broad chimney-board. Trickery and deceit—who knew better than she how bitter, how terrible they were? Did not her heart beat in warm sympathy for this man, with his wounded heart, his life spoiled by false vows? The story brought back the agony of by-gone days; it paled her face and made her hands tremble.

Lady Enid saw the distress she had produced, but attributed it to the girl's sympathetic nature.

"Dear Margery," she said, gently, "do not look so sad. You have a tender heart, dear; I am sorry I told you."

"I am glad," Margery murmured, "for it binds us closer together. What suffering there is in the world!"

"Sometimes it seems too great for us poor mortals; yet, Margery, this world is not all; we have a source of peace, a Comforter in our greatest trials. You know these lines—

"'I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.'"

"They are beautiful!" Margery answered. "But it is hard sometimes to believe them."

"I do not think I should have lived through my trouble if I had not known the truth of them. You have health—whilst I—" Lady Enid gave a little sigh.

"I am selfish—cruelly selfish!" cried Margery, roused by the pathetic sound.

Lady Enid stretched out one small hand and drew Margery to her.

"You have a sorrow of your own too!" she said tenderly. "Ah, yes; I have seen—I know it! Kiss me, Margery! Some day, dear, perhaps you will tell me what it is, and if I can, with all my heart I will help you."

Margery knelt beside the chair for a few moments; then she raised her head.

"Some day I will," she answered steadily; then she rose.

When the footman appeared with the lamps, Margery turned to the piano. She had a sweet, sympathetic voice; but, though Miss Lawson had taught her music, Margery had had no singing-lessons until she came to London to be companion to Lady Enid Walsh. Then, hearing her one night, the young invalid had been charmed, and insisted on Margery's receiving lessons and studying under one of the best masters in town. She made rapid progress, for she loved all music well.

"What will you sing, Margery?" asked Lady Enid, leaning back, watching her young companion's graceful form with loving eyes.

"Elaine's song, the song of love and death. I have a new setting; it is very sweet."

She played a few bars; then her voice filled the room with melody.

"Sweet is true love, though given in vain, in vain,
And sweet is death, who puts an end to pain;
I know not which is sweeter—no, not I.

"Love, art thou sweet? Then bitter death must be.
Love, thou art bitter; sweet is death to me.
Oh, love, if death be sweeter, let me die!

"Sweet love that seems not made to fade away,
Sweet death, that seems to make us loveless clay—
I know not which is sweeter—no, not I."

"It is too sad!" cried Margery, with forced lightness; the misery of her own lost love was almost choking her.

"It is very beautiful," said some one standing in the door-way.

Margery rose quickly, and her eyes rested on the figure of a tall, well-built man with a keen, dark face, a tawny-brown mustache hiding the mouth, and eyes of such liquid beauty that not even the long scar on the forehead could mar them.

Lady Enid uttered a cry of delight.

"Nugent—my brother! Oh, thank Heaven! I am so glad—so glad!"

Lord Court had left the door, and was bending over the slight figure of his sister. Margery, with tears of sympathy in her eyes, turned away, and was leaving the room, when Lady Enid noticed her.

"Margery," she called softly, "you must not go;" then turning to her brother, she said, "Nugent, this is Margery Daw, whom I have so often written to you about; she is my dear friend."

"I am heartily glad to welcome you," said Lord Court, extending a hand to Margery. "I seem to know you already through my sister's letters. Let me thank you in both our names for your kind attention to her."

"My small services merit no thanks," Margery responded simply. "I would do all in my power for Lady Enid, for I love her."

She moved forward and kissed the lips Lady Enid upheld to her; there was a flush of delight on the pale face of the invalid, a glow of unalloyed happiness in the lovely brown eyes.

"Ah, Nugent, it is like a gleam of sunshine to see you again! Where have you come from?"

"From Italy. I paused only one day in Paris—I was eager to see you, my darling." Lord Court drew up a chair to his sister's side, and took her hand in his. "You are looking better, Enid," he added.

"That is due to Margery then. I am so happy with her."

"Miss Daw is a most successful physician," the earl remarked, smilingly.

"I give place to a better," Margery replied; then, with a sweet smile, she left the room.

"Is she not sweet, Nugent?" cried Lady Enid.

"It is the most beautiful face I have ever seen," the earl involuntarily declared.

* * * * * * *

The day succeeding the Earl of Court's arrival was passed by Margery principally in her own room. She felt that the brother and sister had much to speak of that was of moment to themselves; and she shrunk with natural delicacy from intruding. She employed her morning in writing a long letter to Miss Lawson and painting some hand-screens for Lady Enid.

The afternoon sun tempted her to go out, and she wandered round the garden in the square, ignorant that a pair of dark eyes were fixed admiringly on her slight graceful figure and on the wealth of red-gold hair gleaming in the sunlight. It was a dreary plot of ground to call a garden —the trees were begrimed with the smoke of the city, the flower-beds were faded and dull, the very earth was hard and cold-looking—yet all its dreariness was lost in Margery. She paced its paths nearly every day; but she did not see her surroundings — her mind was too full of thought. In her moments of solitude her memory claimed her, though she was struggling hard to forget—the pain of her lost love was too new yet. Again and again she would go back to those two days standing out clear and distinct from all other days—the day of happiness unspeakable and the day when the sun had shone on the hot dusty lane and she had heard the words that drove that wonderful happiness from her tender young heart forever. She was content, gratefully content in her present life, for she had peace and affection; but happy, she whispered to herself, she could never be again.

Her letters to Miss Lawson were cheerful and chatty; but the governess put them aside with a strange sensation of pity. She felt that there was some great sorrow, a sorrow which Margery must bear alone, that none could alleviate. She was gratified at the success of her pupil; and from her sister Mrs. Fothergill, she heard of the warm friendship that already existed between Lady Enid Walsh and her companion. The girl's heartfelt gratitude pleased and touched Miss Lawson, and she was glad to know that her judgment of the maid's character had been right, that Margery was all she had expected. Gratitude indeed was the warmest feeling in Margery's breast just now; she could

not thank her governess enough for assisting her at a time when she most needed assistance. To have stayed at Hurstley would have been worse than death, she told herself. As she crept away in the freshness of the morning, she took her farewell of all that had been dearest and best to her, and, with a courage born of despair, faced the unknown future unfalteringly. Reuben Morris had accepted with little surprise the news of her hasty departure; he knew that Miss Lawson loved the girl in her quiet way, and would watch over her, and her speed to be gone matched his own plans, for the vessel started three days earlier than he had expected, and there was no time to be lost.

Margery traveled up to the great city, silent and sorrowful, her hand clasped in Reuben's, with Miss Lawson by her side. Not till she reached the docks, whither she had pleaded to be allowed to accompany Reuben, did she learn that Robert Bright too sailed away from the old country in the same ship, and the news was the last drop in her already overflowing cup of grief. She spoke a few words to him, urging him to stay; but, when she learned that her love was all that could keep him, she was silent; it was impossible—it could never be. So the two men went together, and Margery stood beside Miss Lawson, the tears blinding her eyes as the huge vessel glided away. Then in silence they retraced their steps; and Margery was launched upon the world. Her secret was safe. Hurstley chattered of her as in Australia, with Reuben Morris and her lover; but Miss Lawson's lips were closed; she kept her promise.

CHAPTER XV.

MARGERY was walking slowly to and fro in the square garden, buried in her thoughts, when a firm step coming toward her made her raise her head, and she saw Lord Court, looking almost handsome and undeniably soldierly in the sunlight.

"I am sent after you, Miss Daw," he said, raising his hat with a smile that lit up his plain face. "Enid is pining for you, and thinks you will be fatigued with so much walking."

Margery laughed a little silvery laugh that sounded

strange in her own ears—it was long since she had been merry.

"Lady Enid does not know my capabilities," she answered. "I am a country-girl, and walking comes naturally to me; but I am quite ready to go to her."

Lord Court turned and kept pace beside her.

"I can see walking is a pleasure to you," he remarked easily. "I have been watching you, Miss Daw, and have been struck by the very un-English nature of your carriage, you bear yourself like an Andalusian. There is something peculiarly ungraceful in the ordinary Englishwoman's walk."

"I think high heels have a great deal to answer for," Margery responded, the color just faintly tinting her cream-white cheeks. "I have been seriously alarmed at the shoes I have seen since I came to town; it must be almost like walking on stilts."

"They are for show, not use," said the earl, smiling. "What a beautiful sky! It reminds me of the sunsets we used to see at Court Manor. My sister, I dare say, has spoken to you of our old home, Miss Daw?"

"Lady Enid is never tired of dwelling on its beauties, she seems to love it so much."

"I have not seen it now for years," the earl said—and Margery saw a shadow cross his face; "but its memory is very dear. In point of beauty and value it does not compare with either Drake Park or Hohen Castle, both Court possessions; to me, however, it is far more beautiful." He paused, then said abruptly, "Miss Daw, do you think it would make Enid happier if she returned to the manor for awhile?"

"Yes," Margery answered, simply; "I am sure of it. She is so good, so sweet, that she never complains; but I know she is pining for a glimpse of the country, and I think she would grow stronger out of London—she has been in town so long."

"What a selfish brute I have been!" muttered the earl to himself. "Poor child—poor Enid! Thank you, Miss Daw," he added quickly. "I will speak to her at once, and make arrangements to start whenever she likes. But you—you do not object to leave London?"

"I?" questioned the girl. "No, Lord Court, I have no objection; it matters little to me where I am."

He cast a quick earnest glance at her.

"You are young to say that."

Margery flushed; she had spoken unreflectingly, and she regretted the words as soon as they were uttered.

"And wrong," she said, with forced lightness. "I shall enjoy the change; and anything that makes Lady Enid happy is a great pleasure to me."

Lord Court was silent; but he read her assumed manner rightly. He knew Margery's history well; still he felt instinctively it was not her orphan state alone that had caused such a remark.

Margery was unaware of his covert glances; she picked two or three leaves from the trees as she passed and arranged them in a cluster with an artistic touch.

"You are an artist, Miss Daw," the earl observed, as they approached the gates.

"I paint a little, but only flowers," she returned.

"I used the brush a few years ago," Lord Court said; "but I do nothing now, and, with the exception of a few Egyptian sketches, I have no drawings of my travels."

He opened the gate as he spoke; then, suddenly meeting the full gaze of her wondrous eyes, he said almost involuntarily:

"I think I could paint you, if you would allow me."

"I will sit to you most willingly," Margery returned, smiling; "but only on the condition that you make a picture of Lady Enid."

"It is a bargain!" he cried; and Margery felt a thrill of pleasure at his words.

By this promise she knew she would bring happiness to the young sister—happiness because her beloved Nugent would be near her.

"Let us go and tell her at once," she said, turning her lovely face, flushed with pleasure, to him. "Ah, you will see my words were right last night! You will be a better physician than I could ever hope to be."

The earl made no reply, but followed her across to the house. At the door of Lady Enid's room Margery paused.

"It will gladden her more coming from you," she whispered; and she hurried away.

Lord Court watched her disappear, then entered the room.

"Have you found her, Nugent?" asked Lady Enid, fixing her brown eyes upon him.

"Yes," he answered, drawing a chair to her couch and looking at her pale face and fragile form with a dull pain at his heart. "We have been talking together, Enid, and we have made two arrangements which we hope will please you. The first is for us all to go down to Court Manor as soon as ever you like. The second is for me to paint your portrait and your friend's—Margery Daw. Does that please you, my darling?"

Lady Enid raised her hands to her eyes—her face was hidden. She made no reply; and her brother leaned over her and kissed her tenderly.

"My sweet Enid!" he murmured. "My poor little one. How selfish I have been!"

Lady Enid let her hands drop.

"Selfish—you selfish, Nugent? How can you say so, when by this very proposal you sacrifice your own wishes? No, my dear brother; I can not accept it."

"But it is my wish, Enid. It will be like a glimpse of peace to see the old place; and, back in her own nest, my darling will grow stronger, please Heaven."

Lady Enid's face had grown a shade paler, her lips were trembling.

"Nugent," she said slowly, "I will go; but, first, will you do something for me?"

"Anything on earth!"

"Then, dear, I wish you to visit Drake Park and Hohen before we start for the manor. It is our duty indeed, Nugent. Think. You have not been near your property for so long that the tenants do not even know you. Will you do so?"

"But I thought you would like to go straight to the manor," the earl said, slowly.

"I would rather wait and go with you, dear, and then we can commence the portraits without further delay. I shall be so glad to have a picture of my sweet Margery. Ah, here she is! What plots have you two conspirators been hatching? Come, confess!"

"Do they not please you?" inquired Margery, kneeling for an instant beside her.

"Please me? Nothing on earth could give me greater

pleasure; but I want Nugent to postpone the journey till his return from the country."

The earl moved to the window, and was standing with folded arms. His face wore a puzzled, almost distressed expression.

"My sister, Miss Daw," he said quietly, "is desirous I should visit my other tenants before starting for Court Manor; and I am satisfied she is right. I have not been down for years; but it will not take me long, and then—"

"And then," finished Lady Enid, with a feeble smile—"then good-bye to dreary, gloomy, dusty London, if—if Doctor Fothergill consents."

"Enid," Lord Court said, going to his sister's side, "what do you mean? Has Fothergill been frightening you? Ah, I knew there was something that made you hesitate! Speak, tell me at once!"

"Nugent, my darling"—and Lady Enid imprisoned his strong hand in her two frail ones—"forgive me! I have been tempted to tell you, and then the thought of buoying you up only for bitter disappointment has stopped me. This is it, my darling." There was a little catch in her breath which he did not notice in his anxiety, but which did not escape Margery, who had risen, and was standing at a little distance, with hands clasped tightly together. "For some time past Doctor Fothergill has been hopeful that by undergoing certain treatment I shall be cured—that is, partially cured—walk by myself, be no longer the great baby I am now; and—and I have agreed to try it, for I do long for health, to be as others are. Now, Nugent, you know my secret—you have wormed it out of me. I did not mean to tell you; but I have been compelled. So you see, darling, I can not leave London while I am under his care. In a little while I shall know whether the treatment is successful or not. I have kept this even from Margery."

Her cheeks were flushed, a light of eagerness was in her eyes. Margery could not see for tears; she slipped her hand into the tiny hot one, and whispered the words that Lord Court spoke; then, deeply moved, she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

Two days passed, and the earl announced his intention of going down to his tenants at the end of the week. They were two peaceful, pleasant days, and Margery found much to occupy her. She would have remained in her own room during her spare moments if Lady Enid would have allowed it; but with pretty tyranny the invalid refused any such concession, and so Margery brought her painting into the boudoir. Lady Enid seemed never tired of watching her as she sat bending over her canvas, and every now and then she would touch her brother gently, and by a sign call his attention to the girl's beauty. Margery liked Lord Court. She was pleased at the graceful deference he showed her, and happy because of the joy his presence brought to Lady Enid. He was a most agreeable companion; his wanderings about the world had provided him with a fund of anecdote and information; and Margery listened delightedly to his voice, though her heart would sink at times at the memory of that other who had spoken of the same scenes. She found that the earl was an artist of more than ordinary ability, and was grateful to him for his many hints, entering into long discussions with a zest that delighted Lady Enid. The earl too found it a strange pleasure to listen to her, and he would start a conversation simply for the sake of hearing her speak, and to watch the ever-changing expression of her sweet face.

He gave himself up now entirely to his sister; his fears were banished, her own hopefulness kindled his, and the delicate flush that appeared on her white cheeks led him to believe that her strength was returning. Margery too shared his eager delight in Lady Enid's recovery; yet amid it all she could not repress a vague feeling of discomfort sometimes, and alarm would rise unbidden when she looked up quickly and saw the unspeakable sadness in Lady Enid's face; but she kept her fears to herself, and indeed dismissed them as fancies when she heard the brother and sister laughing and chatting together.

Lord Court was absent a week; but he sent dispatches daily to town, with hampers of flowers and fruit. The two girls

were ardent lovers of flowers, and Margery would flit about arranging them till the room was scarcely recognizable.

On the day of the earl's return she began the pleasant task of decorating; and, when all the vases were filled, she turned to Lady Enid with the great clusters that remained in her hand.

"Shall I send these up to Lady Merivall, Enid?" she asked—by Lady Enid's special desire she discarded the title when speaking to her friend and mistress.

"Aunt Hannah!" Lady Enid laughed. "Oh, she can not bear flowers, Margery! She would declare that we wished to kill her if we put them in her room!"

Margery buried her face in the flowers.

"How I pity her!" she said slowly. "To me they are as life itself. Yet, do you know, Enid, sometimes the thought comes to me that we are cruel when we cut the blossoms off so ruthlessly—they die so soon."

She gazed admiringly at a small delicate white rose as she spoke; it looked so desolate without its setting of green leaves. A curious fancy seized her—was not her life like this poor flower's, separated from all she loved?

"She is thinking of her grief," thought the invalid girl. "You are too tender, darling," she said gently; "flowers are sent for our use; and, after all, we die as they do." She paused a little, and then went on, "I will tell you where to put those if you will. Nugent loves flowers as we do. Ask Morgan to give you some glasses, and arrange them on his table, will you?"

"Of course! Why did I not think of his before?" and, gathering them in her hands, Margery went swiftly from the room.

Lady Enid lay back very still as she disappeared, a strange yearning look on her face.

"If that only might be," she murmured to herself, "I could go in happiness, I think." She looked toward the door, and her eyes suddenly gleamed with joy. "Nugent," she cried, "you have come back! How good of you to be so early!"

Lord Court bent and kissed her.

"Where is Miss Daw? You are alone."

Lady Enid saw his eager glance.

"She has just left me to put some flowers in your room.

Oh, Nugent, how sweet they are! I breathe the country air again in their scent."

"As you will breathe it in reality, darling, soon. What does Fothergill say?"

"I am progressing slowly," Lady Enid replied, in a quiet voice, though the flush on her cheeks deepened; "it must be another week yet, Nugent, before I can think of starting."

"A week will soon pass," the earl responded tenderly, not noticing her labored manner—"a week, and then, Enid, my darling, we shall return to the home where we were so happy, to the haunts you loved! My life shall henceforth be spent for you and with you, as of old."

Lady Enid put her hand on her brother's.

"You do not dread it?" she whispered.

"All dread is gone—it is buried in the past," he answered firmly, looking into her eyes.

Lady Enid sighed, and Margery entered the room as he released her hand.

"You have been putting some flowers in my room, Miss Daw; that is kind of you."

"I did not know you liked flowers, Lord Court," she answered, with the grave smile that never brought any light to her eyes. "I will remember in future."

"I like all that is beautiful," he said, involuntarily; then, turning to his sister—"Enid, let us celebrate my return. You have not driven out for weeks. Can you bear the fatigue to-day?"

"Yes," replied Lady Enid, with a gleam of delight. "I shall enjoy it."

"It is a lovely day," went on the earl. "I long to drag you from this gloomy room; a drive will do you good, I am sure."

"Yes; I know it will."

Margery knelt for an instant beside the couch.

"Are you quite sure?" she whispered. "Will Doctor Fothergill—"

"He has urged me to go many times," Lady Enid interrupted, kissing her; "so run and put on your hat."

Margery went with a light heart, and in a few minutes followed the slight figure on its straight padded board to the luxurious barouche. Lady Enid's couch was placed in the carriage, for she was compelled to retain her recumbent

position; and, with a heart full of pity, Margery took her seat beside the invalid.

London was very full, considering that the shooting season had commenced, and many people came to the side of the carriage either to bow or to offer their greetings to Lady Enid. To all of these acquaintances Margery was introduced as "my dear friend," and her heart swelled with gratitude to Lady Enid for her delicacy and consideration. Lord Court, though he was busy talking, lost none of the varying expressions that passed across her face. Gradually it was becoming a pleasure to him to be near this girl whom his sister loved; he recognized the rare beauty of her nature, her inborn refinement, and her pride and grace won from him attentions that many another woman had sighed for in vain. Margery was always gratified by his courtesy, though his growing admiration was lost on her. She sat back in the carriage listening to the conversation, speaking only when addressed.

The earl had judged rightly—the drive seemed to have brought new life to his sister. She chatted gayly, breathing the soft air with avidity, and his hope rose higher and higher as he gazed at her animated face. They had turned into the park, which was filled with carriages and equestrians; and Margery, who had been only once before in this part of London, grew interested in watching the groups of people passing to and fro.

Lord Court's eyes wandered from his sister's face to hers, and a sense of peace such as he had never felt in the past four years crept into his heart. Lady Enid saw his eyes turned on Margery, and she smiled to herself a happy little smile; she felt that these two would be friends, and the thought pleased her. Just as they were turning to leave the park, a gentleman rode up to the carriage and entered into conversation with the earl and Lady Enid. Margery sat back, and let her eyes and thoughts wander. She watched, with a smile on her face, two children struggling for a doll, heedless of the voice of their nurse; then suddenly the smile faded, and her heart seemed to stand still. Beneath the trees to their right a party of riders was just moving on—a woman between two men, followed by two grooms. Margery's cheeks blanched, and her hands trembled; she knew that graceful form only too well. It was Vane Charteris—Vane Charteris, with the smile of

content, the glow of perfect happiness on her lovely face; and beside her rode Stuart Crosbie. Margery had looked but once, yet she saw only too well. Vane had turned with a smile to her lover; and he, bending close to her, was murmuring words the tenderness of which might have been guessed by the earnest gaze that accompanied them.

Margery drew back in her seat as they passed; it was a moment of bitter agony. She had thought herself schooled to meet sorrow, that she was able to be firm, that she had cast out all love and despair from her heart and filled it with a desire for utter forgetfulness. Now she saw herself in her weakness. The very sight of Vane Charteris brought back the humiliation she had suffered; while the sight of Stuart, the man who had deceived her, insulted her, wrecked her life at its very beginning, brought back the tumultuous joy of that evening in Weald Wood, the never-ending sorrow of her loss. Ah, she might be as brave as she would, away; but a glimpse of his face had broken down all the barriers that pride had been setting up during these past weeks, and left her as weak as before!

Turning to speak to her, Lord Court saw her pallor and look of pain.

"Something is troubling her," he thought. "She is too young, too fair to look so distressed." Ignoring her apparent faintness, he gave his orders to the footman, and they were driven home.

Margery all that evening was quiet, almost depressed. She knew she might have remained in her own room, had she so wished; but she shrunk from being left alone with her thoughts, from the confession of her own weakness; and she sat with Lady Enid, who, full of the pleasure of her drive, chatted and laughed gayly, not noticing her friend's changed manner. But, though it escaped her, it was quickly detected by her brother; and the pale face of the young girl, the unspeakable depth of sadness in her eyes, touched him with deep sympathy. He came easily and gracefully to her rescue. He took the book from her hand when Lady Enid asked her to read, with a playful remark as to Miss Daw's needle-work progressing slowly, and he alone saw the slender figure leaning back wearily on the wide window-ledge, her work forgotten in her thoughts. He exerted himself to chat to his sister, and then, knowing that her evening was never complete with-

out music, seated himself at the piano and filled the room with the melody of a rich baritone voice.

Margery listened awhile; then the sighing sadness of the music proved too much for her, and, stooping to kiss Lady Enid, she retired to her room.

The night-hours passed slowly and heavily; she could not sleep. Her mind was haunted by the vision of two forms with the radiance of a great happiness in their eyes. Was London then so small that she must be tortured by their faces wherever she went? And her secret—would not that be discovered? They had not seen her to-day; but who could tell whether she might not meet them again? She felt low-spirited and disheartened for a time, then grew gradually easier in her mind. In a week perhaps they would leave London, and down at Court Manor she would have peace, if not happiness. Comforted by this thought, she fell asleep just as the gray dawn was breaking, her troubles forgotten for the time in dreams.

For the next three days life went on as it had before Lord Court arrived. Margery took her solitary walks in the square garden, secure from all fears there, and Lady Enid declared herself much better. As the end of the week drew near, Margery felt her heart lighten. Only a few hours more and she would be safe for a long time!

"Have you your canvas and all the necessaries for our pictures, Nugent?" asked Lady Enid, on the afternoon of the day before that fixed for their departure.

"I have one or two little commissions to execute this afternoon," returned the earl; "then I shall be quite prepared for work."

"Let us go with you; it is a lovely day."

"But the fatigue!" he said warningly. "Remember, Enid, there is the journey to-morrow."

"I should enjoy it," Lady Enid murmured, a little plaintively.

"Then come by all means, my darling."

With a beating heart Margery put on her hat; fain would she have stayed at home, but she could think of no excuse, and she did not like to spoil Lady Enid's pleasure. She shrunk from the idea of seeing those two faces again, and the chance of being recognized.

The earl was waiting for her at the foot on the stairs.

"Enid has sent me for you, Miss Daw," he said hur-

riedly; "but I was most anxious to speak to you for a minute alone. Tell me honestly, do you think she wishes this journey to-morrow? Sometimes I fancy I see a hopeless longing in her eyes, and it almost makes my heart ache."

"Indeed, Lord Court," Margery answered earnestly, "I am sure Lady Enid lives in the very thought of going to her old home. She has talked of it so often. Please do not distress yourself; I have seen that look in her eyes too, but I do not think it means more than a longing to be well."

She put out her hand timidly, and he raised it to his lips.

"Thank you," he said, gently; "you always comfort me, Miss Daw."

Their eyes met for an instant, and he saw again the deep sadness in hers.

"Enid is waiting," he said; "let us go to the carriage."

This time they drove through the streets, and Margery forced herself to talk and smile, though she was trembling with fear. If her smile died away suddenly, and if her voice had not the true ring, it was only the earl who remarked it. Lady Enid, lying back on her couch, was too interested in all that was passing to see the effort and notice the constraint.

At last all the commissions were executed, and it was with a sigh of relief that Margery found the carriage was rolling homeward.

"Shall I ever learn her sorrow?" the earl wondered, as they bowled along, noting her sweet face. "It is only one who has suffered as I have who looks as she does—yet that is impossible in her young life."

Margery met his earnest, questioning gaze; the color rose to her cheeks and she was about to make some remark, when suddenly, to her amazement, the earl leaned forward and pulled her on one side; then followed a sharp shock to the carriage. Dimly she saw a huge impending mass above her, and heard voices raised in alarm; then her senses cleared, and she saw the earl standing in the street, the footman beside him, and a crowd of people hurrying forward.

"There is no damage," cried the earl, getting into the

carriage again—"at least, none to us. You are not hurt?" His tone was intensely eager.

"No, no," Margery answered, quickly; "but Lady Enid—"

"Is all right. She told me so herself, with a smile, just this minute."

Margery bent over the couch.

"Then she deceived you," she said hurriedly, looking up with blanched cheeks; "for she has fainted."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE clock on the mantel-piece struck eight in clear silvery chimes; Margery paused in her walk to and fro in the boudoir, and looked at it. Three hours since they had returned, and carried Enid's poor fragile form to the bedroom, her face as white as death itself. The agony of Margery's suspense was unbearable; she had been alone, listening for, yet, she scarcely knew why, dreading to hear Doctor Fothergill's step on the stair. All thought of self was banished now; she could think only of the sweet angel-woman who had been a spirit of goodness to her, and of the look of speechless grief on the earl's face as he carried his sister into the house. Down-stairs, in another room, a man was sitting with head bent forward as with age. It was the Earl of Court. He had returned from his sister's couch, after placing her there, and, dropping into the chair beside the fire, had never moved during the three weary hours that passed. He heard the doctor slowly descend the stairs; yet he, like Margery, dared not approach him because of the unspeakable dread that was in his heart, and he heard the street door close with a slight shudder at the fears that possessed him.

It was not till the door was gently opened that he roused himself from his trance of despair; then, raising his head, he saw Margery, pale and agitated, standing before him.

"Enid wishes for you," she said faintly.

He started to his feet in an instant.

"You have seen her?" he murmured.

"No," Margery shook her head. "I will come after you; she has asked for us both, and—" She stopped—her voice failed her.

The earl pressed his hands over his eyes, and followed her from the room.

Lady Enid was lying back on her pillows, very pale and faint. She could not move her hand as her brother entered; but he saw the look of pleasure that illumined her face. He bent low over her, and heard her voice come only in a whisper, and that with a painful effort.

"You are better, Enid?" he murmured, hoarsely. "Oh, say you are better, my darling!"

"I shall be soon, Nugent," she answered. "Have you seen Doctor Fothergill?"

He shook his head and he thought he saw a look of pain gather on her face.

"I am sorry," she said, faintly, "for I must tell you myself."

"Tell me what, Enid?" he asked, his voice almost inaudible in its huskiness.

She did not answer at once, but, after awhile she raised her weak hand and passed it over his brow.

"Nugent," she faltered, her tones a little clearer, "I want you to give me a promise, dear."

"Need you ask for one!" he answered, pressing her hand to his lips, then clasping it firmly within his own.

"I want you to be a friend to Margery; she has no one, and I love her. Nugent, my darling, do not look at me like that—there is no hope. Oh, don't cry, my own dear brother! Listen! I have deceived you"—her voice grew fainter—"I have been growing weaker and weaker every day. This is the finish."

The earl had sunk upon his knees; his face was almost hidden. Lady Enid's hand, wandering over his hair, touched his eyes—they were wet with tears.

"Don't, don't! Oh, Nugent, you break my heart!"

He was up again in an instant, his grief repressed by an iron will.

"You promise?" she said eagerly.

"I promise all you ask," he answered. "Oh, why can not I die instead of you?"

"You must live and keep your promise," Lady Enid whispered; then she closed her eyes for a minute; and, in despair, he beckoned to the maid to moisten the pale lips.

The heavy lashes were raised, and the girl's eyes smiled again.

"I have one great, great wish," she murmured faintly.

"It is granted. What would I not do for you, Enid?"

"Make Margery Daw your wife!"

The earl started, and his color deepened.

"If she consents," he answered, after a moment's pause, "I will."

"She is so good—ah, Nugent, you do not know how good! I have grown to love her as my sister. She will watch over you for my sake when—I am gone!"

She lay back silent for a minute, then turned her eyes on her maid.

"Ask Miss Daw to come now."

The earl moved away and buried his face in his folded arms on the mantel-piece. Margery came in softly, then, with one deep sigh, crouched beside the bed and put her lips to the thin hands.

"Margery," whispered Lady Enid—"my dear Margery!"

"You are better—oh, tell me you are better, Enid!" faltered Margery.

"Darling, listen to me. I am dying. My poor Margery, be brave. I have known it a long time; the shock to-day has—has—only hastened it. But I want you to do something for me. Margery, do not promise till you have heard what it is. Nugent!" The earl came to her with slow steps. "You shall not be left alone, Margery, when I am gone. Margery, you have loved me—you know all; I want you to be my brother's wife!"

Margery drew back for an instant, and stood with her hands pressed against her bosom, her mind distracted, the words just uttered ringing in her ears.

Could she link herself to one whom she could never love, though she deeply respected him? Could she give herself to another while she believed herself pledged to Stuart Crosbie forever? Her eyes met the sweet brown ones, already dim with pain, turned wistfully upon her. A flood of pity filled her; she dropped upon her knees, and breathed:

"I will!"

Lady Enid waited a moment; then, grasping Margery's hand, she held it toward the earl, and across her bed the compact was sealed.

* * *

"There is one—thing more," she whispered, with difficulty; "the—end may be soon. I could die—happier if—if you were made man—and wife now."

The earl was silent; but Margery raised her head, her cheeks as pale as those lying on the pillow.

"It shall be so," she said, clearly; "be comforted."

The earl stooped, and pressed his lips to his sister's; a sigh burst from his overcharged heart.

"As Margery says, I say; we will be married here in the morning. I will arrange it."

Then, without another word, he passed out of the room.

Margery hardly moved all through the long terrible night that followed. Lady Enid held her hand within her own, and, fearful of disturbing her few moments of slumber, Margery did not stir, though she grew faint and stiff as the hours passed. What were her thoughts during the interval? She could not have told; but the dominant feeling was one of bitter grief, an agony of regret and sorrow as she looked at the pale young face with the seal of death already on it. The promise she had given did not come home to her in those silent moments; she was striving to gauge the depths of Enid's great and noble nature. How brave, how strong she had been, with the knowledge that she was doomed ever present in her breast! What courage had filled that poor fragile frame, what an infinity of love that feebly beating heart! Ah, what a lesson was it to the girl crouched in that sick-room to bury self and live for others!

Toward early dawn—the girl was worn out with fatigue and sorrow—Margery's eyes closed; and, with her wealth of red-gold curls spread over the coverlet, she slumbered peacefully. Lady Enid woke early. She was faint, even weaker than the night had left her; yet, as she saw the daylight creep into the room, her heart almost leaped with joy—her mind was at rest. Her eyes lingered with tenderness on Margery's tired head; and, as the first rays of the morning sun touched the luxuriant tresses of hair, making them as a ruddy-golden halo, she murmured, "Nugent will be content by and by," and lay back, waiting till her maid or Margery should awake.

The sun was well up before Margery raised her heavily fringed eyelids; but, once aroused, she was angry with herself for sleeping.

"My sweet Margery," whispered Lady Enid, "my poor tired darling!"

"Forgive me," murmured Margery.

"Forgive you! You were worn out. Listen, darling! Nugent will be here soon. Go to your room, and put on a white gown." She smiled faintly. "I—I wish it; you shall have no bad omens at your wedding, Margery. Pauline, attend mademoiselle."

Margery hesitated, and then obeyed silently.

"Heaven give me strength!" prayed Enid, as she felt herself growing faint. "But this one thing, this marriage over, and I shall die content."

Margery went to her room, and listlessly allowed the maid to wave her hair and adjust the simple white cambric dress; but her hands were trembling and her senses numb. A wedding! It seemed like a dream. The prayer-book the maid handed her recalled her to the reality; and with faltering steps she went back to the dying woman.

Three men were in the room as she entered, but she was scarcely conscious of their presence. She went straight to Lady Enid, and sat down beside her, her hand clasped in hers, her head bowed.

Then she felt herself raised to her feet, she saw Dr. Fothergill bend and put a vial to Enid's rigid lips, and the next minute a solemn voice sounded through the room, and the marriage-service began. Margery felt her hand clasped in a firm hold; she uttered her responses in a voice that sounded far away, but her eyes never left the pale face lying back on the pillows, with a gleam of joy in the sweet eyes.

The ceremony was over, the blessing was spoken, and together Lord Court and his wife knelt beside Enid's bed to catch the faint whispers that fell from her pallid lips; they saw her eyes gaze into theirs with a glow of heavenly radiance, they saw her hand move feebly toward them, they seemed to hear the prayer uttered for their happiness; and then the dying girl's eyelids drooped, a fluttering sigh escaped her lips, her head fell forward, and—Margery knew no more.

Nugent, Earl of Court, saw the servants bear his wife from the room; but he remained kneeling by his sister's body, gazing on the calm, marble-like face, the still form of her he had loved so well.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VANE CHARTERIS was astonished beyond words when she found that the assertion she had made regarding Margery's voyage to Australia in company with Robert Bright and her so-called father was absolutely confirmed by fact. Nothing could have been more opportune, no more satisfactory *dénouement* to the whole affair could have taken place had she arranged it herself. It had needed only jealousy to finish what she had begun; and its poison now rankled in Stuart Crosbie's heart. He was stunned, almost overwhelmed by Margery's apparent treachery and heartlessness. He did not know, he had never fathomed till now how greatly he had loved, what a flood of passion had overtaken him. Margery had been the sun of his existence, and she was gone—worse than gone—she was faithless!

Vaguely he repeated the words over and over again, as he sat listlessly in a chair looking out over the fair landscape, but seeing it not. Faithless! The girl who had kindled the glow of all earthly bliss, the girl who had seemed a very angel of purity and beauty, was false! While he held her clasped in his arms and breathed his earnest sacred vows of love, she was false! As she smiled in radiant tenderness and whispered back her own, she was false! Through it all she had been false! It was inconceivable; it was maddening!

A fortnight wore away, but Stuart's mood did not alter; he sat silent and morbid, trying to understand it all, to get at the truth. Vane grew a little troubled at his manner—she had not imagined the wound would have been so deep. Her own shallow nature could not comprehend the depths, the intensity, the passion of love. To her it had appeared that Stuart would of course be angry. As a proud man, that was but natural, and she had expected to see him defiant, hard, reckless. This strange silence, this quiet misery amazed and annoyed her. But she was outwardly at her best all this time. She never spoke to her cousin respecting their former confidences. She made him feel rather than know the depths of her womanly sympathy, thus

making her worldly tact appear as innate refinement and tender delicacy. She moved about as in harmony with his gloomy thoughts; her laughter never jarred; her voice often soothed him; and, last, but not least, she warded off any attacks from Mrs. Crosbie, whose brow contracted in many an ominous frown because of what she termed her son's folly and want of dignity.

It was tedious work sometimes, and Vane often grew vexed and weary; but this gloom could not last, she told herself; there would come a day when Stuart would rouse himself and cast aside all thought of his dead love, trampling on the memories of it as on a vile and worthless thing. She must not fail now, seeing that she had succeeded so well hitherto. But a little patience, and she would win—she must win, not only for her love's sake, but for her ambition. News had reached her of the marriage of one of her most detested rivals, a girl younger than herself. She could not face the world again without some weapon in her hand to crush the woman she hated and bring back her lost power. It was as Stuart Crosbie's wife that she determined her triumph should come. He bore no title; but his name was as prominent as any in the land, his wealth would be untold, and, as *châtelaine* of Crosbie Castle and Beecham Park, her social position would be undeniable. Even Mrs. Crosbie did not guess the fire that burned beneath Vane's calm exterior; but her desire for the marriage was certainly as great in one way as her niece's. Lady Charteris, who had by this time recovered from her surprise at her daughter's strange freak in staying so long at the castle, saw nothing, but chattered and slumbered away her days placidly enough, content to know that Vane was happy.

Sir Douglas Gerant had disappeared as strangely and as suddenly as he had arrived. Two days after the eventful drive to Chesterham he took his departure, greatly to Miss Charteris's and Mrs. Crosbie's satisfaction. There was something in his dry cynical manner which made them singularly uncomfortable, and their strict ideas of etiquette were greatly disturbed by his many unorthodox acts. Stuart at any other time would have regretted his cousin's departure; but now it made but little impression on him, and, while he exerted himself to bid him farewell, his mind was with his trouble, and as Sir Douglas walked away, he gave himself up again to his unhappy thoughts.

A fortnight passed uneventfully, and then Sir Douglas reappeared as suddenly as he had left. Mrs. Crosbie met him with profuse but insincere words of welcome. She was just enough to recognize how much he had done for Stuart. Sir Douglas put aside all her gracious speeches.

"It is only a flying visit," he said tersely. "I want to have a few words with Stuart."

"Oh, I am so sorry you will not stay," Mrs. Crosbie responded. "I had hoped you had come for the shooting; Sholto expects a few guns down. We should have had a party for the twelfth of August but for Stuart's accident. Can I not persuade you?"

"I should yield to your persuasion, cousin," answered Sir Douglas, with an old-fashioned bow and a gleam of merriment in his keen gray eyes—he knew right well he was no favorite with madame—"but that unfortunately time and tide wait for no man, and I sail for the antipodes at the end of this week."

"The antipodes!" cried Mrs. Crosbie; and she would have questioned him further but that he ended the interview by walking away in search of Stuart.

He found the young man strolling listlessly about the grounds attended by all his canine pets. There was no doubt as to the sincerity of the pleasure on Stuart's face when he saw his cousin; but Sir Douglas was quick to notice the worn look and the gloom that almost immediately settled again on his features.

"How is the arm?" he asked quietly.

"Mending rapidly," Stuart answered. "I shall have it out of the splints in another fortnight."

"Don't hurry it," said Sir Douglas, as he turned and strolled beside the young man; "it was a nasty fracture, you know."

They walked on in silence until they reached a quiet spot, and then Sir Douglas halted.

"Stuart," he said, "I have come down here on purpose to see you. I want you to give me a promise."

"It is already given," Stuart answered, roused from himself for awhile, and stretching out his hand.

"You know that I have made you my heir, that I have willed all I possess to you with certain conditions."

"Yes, I know," Stuart answered, his face flushing a lit-

tle. "Do not think me ungrateful if I say I wish it were not so. I do not want your property; I—"

"I am aware of that," interrupted Sir Douglas dryly. "If you had wanted it, you would not have had it. But it is not of that I want to speak; it is of the conditions. They are more to me than any fortune you could name."

"Whatever they are, I accept them willingly, with all my heart, and, if it be in my power, they shall be fulfilled."

Stuart spoke firmly, his eyes as steadfast as his words.

"Thank you, Stuart," responded Sir Douglas quietly. "I felt—I knew you would answer me so." He paused a little, then went on slowly. "I leave England again at the end of the week on a search that has lasted my lifetime—hopeless, alas, in the years that are gone, but touched now with the blessedness of hope! Yes, thank Heaven, I have a clew!"

Stuart looked in wonder at his cousin's face; it was illumined with color, and there was an unusual glow in the eyes.

"I can not bring myself to speak to you now, Stuart, on this subject; but if I am successful, I will open my heart to you—if not, and anything should happen to me, this letter"—taking an envelope from an inner pocket—"will tell you all—will give you the secret of my life. Guard it well, and, if the time should come soon, swear to do what I have asked you in it."

"I swear," said Stuart, solemnly, his hand closing over the letter.

"Now I start with a lighter heart than I have had for years. The days will pass quickly, and, when I reach Australia, who knows—"

"Australia!" broke in Stuart, his face drawn and pale. "You are going to Australia?"

"I said at the end of this week. What is it, Stuart?"

"Oh, that I were free to go with you!" muttered Stuart.

Like a flame of fire, the word "Australia" had set the passion of jealousy running through his veins, calling up the dormant longing for revenge that had found a resting-place in his heart. Could he not leave all that distressed and oppressed him, and rush away to that distant land, to face him who had stolen the most precious jewel of his life, to bring shame on her who had deceived and tricked him? The picture of Margery's loveliness rose before him and

made his heart beat wildly with the rush of wrath and love that came over him.

"Stuart," Sir Douglas said quietly, almost tenderly, "I would ask you to go with me gladly but for one thing—you are not free—your father needs you. He could not live without you; go from him, and he will sink before your return. He is not strong; this summer, he has told me many times, has tried him terribly, and your accident was a shock."

"Yes, you are right," responded Stuart gloomily, after a moment's pause. "I will stay here. And yet it is hard."

Sir Douglas did not catch the last words.

"I have always loved Sholto," he said, "and to rob him of you would be cruel. No, Stuart, your place is here."

They moved on and approached the house; but before they entered Sir Douglas stretched out his hand.

"Heaven bless you, lad!" he said tenderly. "We may never meet again. May you have all the happiness and sunshine in your life that a man such as you ought to expect! Remember your promise."

"I have sworn, and I will keep it."

They returned to the castle; and, soon after that, Sir Douglas Gerant left for London.

His cousin's visit broke the spell of Stuart's morbid inactivity. The monotonous quiet of Hurstley seemed suddenly to appall him. He could no longer sit and nurse himself; he was restless, almost feverish in his movements. He went out early in the morning and did not return till the day was spent; and, though he tried to banish every memory of his brief dream from his mind, Vane detected the nervous restlessness still in his face. In her heart she rejoiced at these signs of awakening; they were but the forerunners of that proud contemptuous mood which she longed to see reveal itself. Life was dull at the castle; but, though she yawned and was inexpressibly bored, she did not intend to give way; and at last she had the satisfaction of feeling that success was hers when her aunt announced that Stuart wished the whole party to leave Crosbie and go to London.

If he remained much longer at Hurstley, Stuart said to himself, the monotony and inactivity would drive him mad. So, to Vane's and his mother's delight, he proposed a fortnight's stay in town, a round of theaters, and such gayeties

as a slack season offered, and then a return to the castle with a large party for the shooting.

It was then that Vane began to reap her reward. Stuart seemed to have remembered all she had done for him, all her thoughtfulness, gentleness, womanly kindness; and it was to her he turned in a frank friendly fashion which at once delighted her and deceived her by its ring of apparently genuine forgetfulness.

To London they all went, save the squire, and in leaving him, Stuart thought of his absent cousin's words; but it was only for a fortnight, and then he would be back again, brave in forced courage, steady in his pride, to walk over the very ground, wherein his whole love lay buried.

It was a delightful time to Vane; she rode, walked, went sight-seeing, with Stuart always in close attendance, and, though few of her acquaintances were in town, she noticed with pleasure that some of her "dear friends" were passing through London on their way from the Continent to the country, and she left them to draw their own conclusions as to her relationship with Stuart Crosbie. As for Stuart, he lived for the moment in a whirl of forced excitement and pleasure. He determined with reckless swiftness to give way to sorrow no more; he buried the memory of Margery, and set his foot, as he thought, firmly on the grave of his love; he even thrust recollection from him; he laughed, rode, chatted with Vane, and gradually her influence made itself felt. If, in the night, visions of his lost love floated through his dreams, pride in the morning, dispelled his weakness by recalling her falseness; and he turned to Vane as a woman whom, though he could never love, he could respect and trust. To the world his devotion had but one name, that of a suitor; and, heedless of people's tongues, heedless of Vane's triumphant eyes, Stuart went on his way, living for a time in a dream of reckless excitement that would soon pass and leave him plunged in as deep an abyss of despair as before.

It was in one of these moments that Margery had seen him beneath the trees, bending his handsome head to gaze into Vane's eyes. The action meant nothing to him—Vane was his cousin, his confidante, his friend. Had his gaze but wandered to the carriage drawn beside the rails, and rested on the sweet face pallid and drawn by the agony of pain that had come to her, he would have forgotten his

cousin's existence, and rushed, with a madness of joy, a delirium of happiness, to Margery's side. But Margery was unseen; the cousins paced by slowly, and the image of that face, that form with the right arm still hung in a sling, those eager eyes, was graven on her memory in characters the clearness of which tortured her and the steadfastness of which nothing could remove.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Man's love is like the restless waves,
Ever at rise and fall;
The only love a woman craves
It must be all in all.
Ask me no more if I regret—
You need not care to know;

"A woman's heart does not forget—
Bid me good-bye, and go.
You do not love me—no;
Bid me good-bye, and go.
Good-bye, good-bye—'tis better so;
Bid me good-bye, and go."

MARGERY moved dreamily; she opened her eyes. A flood of glorious sunshine filled the room. She felt strangely weak; her hands were almost numb, her head was heavy; she could do nothing but lie back and rest—rest, and listen to the sound of a rich voice singing, somewhat near, a plaintive sighing song—

"You do not love me—no;
Bid me good-bye, and go.
Good-bye, good-bye—'tis better so;
Bid me good-bye, and go."

Margery moved again. This time her eyes wandered round the room; it was strange to her. Where was she? What place was this?"

While a look of perplexity and pain was dawning on her pure pale face, some one bent over her.

"Miladi is better?"

"Where am I?" asked Margery faintly.

"Miladi has been ill," replied the quiet soothing voice—"very ill. She is by the sea now. Does not miladi hear the waves?"

A faint rippling sound was borne in on the silence, mingling with the song without.

"The sea!" murmured Margery vaguely. "Where? Am I dreaming?"

"Miladi does not forget me? I am Pauline."

"Pauline!" repeated the girl, striving to dispel the dense cloud that shrouded her memory.

"Yes, miladi. I dressed you for your marriage that sad, sad morning." Pauline spoke slowly. "Can miladi not remember now?" she added softly.

Margery looked at her strangely and intently.

"I can remember nothing—I seem to be in a dream."

She put up her left hand to push back the clusters of her hair, and as it fell again to the silken coverlet she gazed at it intently. It looked frail and white, and on the third finger was a ring—a plain wide band of gold.

The maid touched her hand.

"It is miladi's wedding-ring," she said, divining the thoughts of wonder and the speculation that were filling Margery's mind.

"My wedding-ring!" echoed the girl, still wonderingly. "Am I married then?"

Pauline looked at her mistress in alarm. Had the fever really touched her brain? She almost feared it.

"Miladi will remember," she whispered tenderly. "She was married one morning so early, by Lady Enid's death-bed. Miladi has been ill—delirious since—but she is better now. Miladi must think—must try to remember now for milord's sake."

"By Lady Enid's death-bed!" whispered Margery; then the cloud vanished suddenly from her memory, and, with bitter pain, she remembered all.

Pauline stood by, distressed, yet relieved, as her mistress put her two thin hands to her face and the great tears rolled through the slender fingers — the weeping might agitate for a time, but it would do good in the end. For three weeks Margery had lain between life and death. Her overwrought mind and body had given way suddenly beneath the shock of Lady Enid's death; she had been so tired, so shaken by her former trouble and despair, that the excitement of her marriage, the supreme agony when she realized that the sweet friend and sister had passed away, were too much for her, and she sunk beneath the

weight. Nugent, Earl of Court, sat and watched beside her couch. He saw the struggle that took place between the terrible fever and Margery's delicate yet healthy constitution, not daring to give words to his fears. She knew nothing during those days—her lustrous eyes met his unmeaningly. She was his wife, the treasured bequest of his dying sister; but all his devotion, his tenderness, the greatness of his new passion for her, was unknown—her mind was a blank.

When the fever passed away she grew better in body, but the vacant look lingered in her eyes, and her memory had not returned. The doctors spoke hopefully, and ordered a change of air, and so they removed her to the sea-side, and waited for the moment to come when the dark cloud which obscured her mind would lift, and she would be the Margery of old. For a week there was no improvement, but on this day nature seemed to wake from its trance, and, when Pauline spoke, as she had spoken many times before, the veil fell, and Margery's memory came back to her.

Presently the tears stopped, her hands fell to her side, and she raised herself feebly into a sitting position. She was not in bed, but, dressed in a loose white-silk gown, resting on a couch. She looked round, critically taking in the costly appointments of the room. Pauline watched her curiously, and noted each sign of pleasure that flitted across the lovely pale face.

"It is beautiful," Margery declared after a time; "and the sea is there"—pointing to the large bay-window through which the sunlight streamed. "I will look at it, Pauline; I have never seen the sea."

The maid passed her arm round the slender figure, and guided it to the window, pushing forward a large luxurious chair as they reached it, into which Margery sunk, with a sigh of fatigue. She closed her eyes for one minute, then opened them on a picture of such new, such wondrous startling beauty that her pulses thrilled with the momentary delight.

It was the sea—

> "The sea, the sea, the open sea—
> The blue, the fresh, the ever free!"

Everything was forgotten in that moment's supreme pleasure. She had conjured up visions of the ocean, fed

by pictures she had seen; but no canvas could ever portray the boundless dignity, the majesty, the rippling beauty of the sea as it appeared to Margery on that October afternoon.

Margery gazed and gazed, her wonderment growing greater as she looked, and her mind flew back to the afternoon when Stuart had spoken of the sea, dwelling on its beauties so lovingly that she thought she had realized it in all its grandeur and majesty. Now she knew that not even his tongue could convey a true idea of its mightiness. She sat very silent, watching the rolling waves; the song without had ceased, and Pauline had retired to the further end of the room. Suddenly the weird sadness of the sea's music struck a chord in her heart. It seemed to be singing a dirge, and her mind woke again to its load of sorrow. For the first time the real facts of her marriage came home to her. A look of despair gathered in her eyes, her thin white hands were pressed to her lips. Enid, dear sweet Enid, was gone! The brief friendship, strong as though it had been cemented by years, was broken, and she was alone, alone with her husband, a man whom she had pitied, respected, liked, but a man whom she could never love, to whom she must ever wear a mask, for love was dead within her to all but one, and for that one it lived as strongly as of yore. What had she done? Bound herself for life, given a sacred vow, while every pulse in her thrilled for that other man, despite his cruelty and his humiliating insults! Oh, that she had spoken openly to Lady Enid! This marriage then would never have taken place. But her silence had produced this result; the sister's tenderness, the friend's affection, had prompted the dead woman to speak her wish, and at such a moment Margery had yielded. She did not regret her promise to Enid. The thought that her marriage had soothed the dying came almost as a gleam of pleasure. It was for her husband's sake she sorrowed, and for her own. Could aught but misery follow such a hasty union? Would not they both repent in bitterness and despair?

Margery rose slowly from her seat, feeling weak and wretched. The spirit of the sea, entrancing at first, had brought with it a host of sad thoughts that destroyed its beauty and made her shudder at its music.

Pauline had retired quietly from the room. Margery did

not notice her absence; and, as she regained her feet and put one hand on the chair to steady herself, she said faintly, with half a smile—

"You must help me, Pauline. I am very foolish; but—"

A hand clasped hers—not Pauline's, but a firm strong hand. It was her husband's.

Lord Court drew the slender white-robed figure gently to his arms.

"It is not Pauline, my darling; it is I. Nay, do not look so frightened! You are still very weak, my poor one! Pauline came to bring me the good news that you had recovered your memory, and I hastened to you at once —my wife—my sweet one!"

Margery rested quietly in his arms—she had not strength to move—but a tumult of thoughts surged in her brain. Now she must speak, must tell this man of her weakness, of her love. It must be done now in the beginning of their married life; she must not delay; it would be so difficult afterward. And he must know the truth—know that for Enid's sake she had uttered words that should never have been spoken, that would be as emptiness in her eyes.

"I wish to speak," she murmured faintly; but the words did not reach her husband's ears. She was nervously excited, and her strength was already spent.

The earl drew her still closer to his breast.

"Let me hold you in my arms for one instant, my wife," he said tenderly and gravely; "it comes as such a blessed happiness after weeks of misery and suspense that I have endured. Margery, my darling, ours was a strange marriage; but it was tenderly blessed by the smile of one we both loved. Ah, Enid could read the heart well! She saw into the very depths of mine; she knew that its sterile ground had brought forth a pure, a holy plant—my love for you! She saw the misery of the past banished from my life by the tender influence of that love, and she realized that life might once more be made bright and beautiful to me—that earthly trust, faith and happiness might yet be mine; and so she gave you, darling, to me, to fill the void her flight would make, to lead me by your sweetness, your tenderness, to things better and purer, like your own pure self."

A pang of remorse pierced Margery's heart. Could she speak, and at one word blast this new-found happiness, these Heaven-inspired hopes? No, she had not the courage. She must bury the past. Henceforth Margery Daw, with all that appertained to her, was banished, and Margery, Countess of Court, lived in her stead, strong in the determination to keep her vows and prove herself worthy of the devotion of her husband.

She raised her pale lovely face to his, and a steadfast light shone in her great blue eyes.

"By Heaven's help," she responded faintly yet clearly, "I will do it!"

Lord Court bent his head, and pressed his lips to hers; then, lifting her tenderly, he bore her to the couch, and laid her once more on the pillows.

"You are a very frail Margery," he said kindly, contemplating her as she lay back wearily; "but now you must make great efforts to get well, and you shall soon go out and feel the sea-breezes on your cheeks—perhaps they will bring a little color to them."

"I am always pale," she whispered in reply. "How long have I been ill?"

"A month now. Ah, I had almost begun to despair—you were so long recovering."

"And—and Enid?"

"Is at her old home at last," said the earl, in a constrained voice. "We carried her down and laid her in the old church-yard. She always wished to buried there."

"I must go down and see the grave," murmured Margery.

"When you are able, you shall, my darling. Court Manor is waiting for its mistress. Ah, Margery, little did I think years ago that I should so gladly return to my home, all pain and bitterness rooted out of my heart forever, and in their place the sweet fragrance of love and happiness, brought me by a spirit of peace and purity—my wife!"

Margery moved her head restlessly on the silken pillow; his deep tenderness and devotion touched her wounded heart with healing gentleness, yet her burden was none the less, for she could never repay such great love, she could never give him what he gave her. Her pride had suffered such humiliation beneath the cold cruelty of Vane Char-

teris' tongue that her heart might have thrilled now with satisfaction in the knowledge that she was—in the world's eyes—a great person—Countess of Court, a peeress of the realm. But there was no pride in her heart. Her husband's tender words only brought back with a sudden rush the memory of the great chasm between them. She drew her hand slowly from his, with the touch of his lips still clinging to it.

"You know," she whispered, meeting his gaze with her great starlike eyes—"you know—Enid told you that I am quite alone in the world—a waif, a stray?"

"Yes, I know it, my darling."

"And you care for me just the same?"

"I love you," he answered, smiling; "I loved you from the very first. Yes, Enid told me your sad story, and it only binds you still closer to me; henceforth I must be mother, father, brother, sister, husband, all in one. Do not hold a thought in your heart that such a circumstance could make any difference. Remember—

> "'For unto every lord his own lady is
> All ladies and all beauties and all mysteries,
> The breathing multiple of roses passionate,
> Of perfect pearls, of birds with happy melody—
> Ay, a mere girl, yet in herself a universe.'

A poet sung that, Margery, and it is the very echo of my heart."

"You are very good," she murmured gently; and then, bending to touch her cheek with his lips, Lord Court went slowly from the room.

Margery lay silent, his words ringing in her ears, and again and again she told herself that she could not destroy this man's new-found peace, his life's happiness. She must strive to crush all love and remembrance from her heart, turn her face from the past, with all its store of sweetness and bitterness, and look upon the future, where the path of duty lay straight before her. Loyalty and honor demanded the sacrifice, and she would obey them.

> "I shall go my ways, tread out my measure,
> Fill the days of my daily breath
> With fugitive things not good to treasure—
> Do as the world doth, say as it saith.
> But, if we had loved each other,
> Oh, sweet!"

CHAPTER XX.

DAYS glided on, and Margery grew gradually stronger. October was nearing its close, but still the sunshine was warm and genial, and the wind from the sea soft and gentle. It was quite a little fishing-village where the Earl and Countess of Court were staying, a rambling quaint three-cornered place, inhabited by healthy strong-limbed fisher-folk. Lord Court had brought his wife down to Wavemouth by the advice of two London physicians, and when the first week of anxiety was passed, and he saw signs of returning health on her sweet face, he was thankful beyond words. The village people were honored and awe-struck by the presence of an earl and countess in their midst; they had few grand visitors at Wavemouth. An artist now and then paid the place a visit—indeed there was one staying there when Margery arrived. He sketched the ruddy-faced children and made his way to the mothers' hearts by his sweet clear voice and gentle manners.

Margery learned afterward that the song she had heard so clearly that afternoon when she woke to remembrance had come from his artist's lips; but she never saw the singer—he quitted the village soon afterward, and left the children and maidens lamenting.

Lord Court had brought a low easy carriage down with them, and he drove his wife about the picturesque village, watching with a throb of pleasure the interest dawn in her face. Wavemouth was so quiet, so peaceful, so completely in keeping with her desire for rest, that Margery loved the place.

She was still far from strong, and the sea-breezes brought a sense of relief and freshness to her spirit. She was fighting a hard battle with herself, striving with all her might to crush out her old love and turn to her husband, whose depths of goodness and generosity she was learning to know better each day. But as she grew stronger the struggle was more bitter; her thoughts would fly to Hurstley, to the dead Mary Morris whose memory she held so dear, and then to that other who was, despite all her efforts, so inextricably bound up with her existence.

The earl, totally ignorant of the secret in his wife's breast, reveled in his new-found happiness, rejoiced in the possession of his treasure. Day by day he was drawn closer to this girl whose sweetness had been sung by the lips of his dead sister. It was so great a change to him after those four years of ceaseless pain, distrust, and darkness! Often in those days he had tried to escape from the remembrance of his wife's mistake; but he could find no relief till that evening when he stood in the door-way listening to the sweet clear girlish voice ringing through the room, and then suddenly misery and despair vanished and hope revived—hope that afterward became a sweet reality.

> "Not by appointment do we meet Delight and Joy—
> They heed not our expectancy;
> But round some corner in the streets of life
> They on a sudden clasp us with a smile."

And now Margery was his wife—his very own; there was none to claim her, none to share the treasure of her love. Was not this blessing too great? His earnest eyes, dark with tenderness, were never tired of watching her lovely unconscious face as she sat buried in her memories of the past, the look of unutterable sadness that had touched him in their earlier acquaintance seeming to him now caused but by the recollection of her childhood's history, her mother's death.

At last the sunshine died, the sea's calm was gone, the tiny rippling movement was changed into gigantic rolling waves crested with white foam and dashing on to the beach in angry majesty, with a sound as of thunder. Margery loved the sea in its fury; she would sit and watch it for hours, her heart beating fast, and her nerves thrilling at the rage in its fierce waves and dashing spray. The anger, the wildness of the elements, relieved her overwrought mind, and the very tumult brought her peace.

She stood at the window one afternoon gazing at the expanse of dull leaden-green water. There were no waves; it was as if a titanic movement from below agitated the surface and caused the heavy sudden motion. As she stood thus, her husband approached her.

"Not tired of the sea yet, my darling?" he said, with a smile. "I shall be afraid to suggest a migration if this devotion lasts much longer."

"It is so wonderful," Margery answered dreamily. "I can see such strange pictures, imagine such things, as I watch it. I have never seen it as it is to-day."

"There will be a storm to-night. I have just seen one of the fishermen, and he says they expect very rough weather."

"It looks an angry discontented sea," Margery said, still dreamily—"as if its passion would be terrible when it did break forth."

"Look at the foot of the Templar's Rock! It is beginning already; the foam is as white as snow. There is, as you say, Margery, sullen discontent in its look; but there is also a wildness of despair. It reminds me, looking at that whirling rush round the rock, of Tennyson's words—

"'Break, break, break
At the foot of thy crags, O sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me!'"

With a little shudderMargery turned from the window.

"To-day has broken the spell," she said hurriedly, with forced lightness. "I think I am tired of the sea at last."

"You shall leave it when you will—to-night even if you wish it, my darling; it is still early afternoon. I will telegraph for rooms. Pauline shall accompany you; the others can remain, with the exception of my man, and follow to-morrow."

"But it is so much trouble," began Margery.

"Trouble, my sweet, where you are concerned! You would like a change? Yes, I see it in your eyes! We will go, and this, Margery, shall be the beginning of our married life, henceforth to be spent hand in hand together. I will go at once and give my orders; we will start by the first train. I believe there is one about 4:30."

"You are so good!" Margery murmured.

He bent, and raised her hands to his lips.

"Never say that again, my darling; my whole life is for you."

As he left, and looked at the sea, Margery turned once more to the window. Yes, she must go.

Suddenly the misery, the weight of her struggle seemed to overcome her. She had sat and dreamed much; she must now put aside all dreams, and turn to life in real

earnest. The sea no longer comforted her, and the words her husband had quoted strengthened the desire that had been growing within her to leave it.

"The tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me!"

The truth, the agony in those words, struck her with bitter force. She roused herself with a great effort, determined to fling aside all her weakness and face her duty.

The entrance of Pauline checked her musings.

"Miladi is really going!" exclaimed the maid, delight shining in her great black eyes, "Ah, but I am glad! Miladi will be so much better away from this dismal place; it is enough to give one the *migraine*. Miladi is wise."

"You are glad to go, Pauline?" questioned Margery, smiling, as she watched the maid bring out a costly mantle and furs for her coming journey.

"*Ma foi, mais oui*, miladi! I love London—the sea is so *triste*. Miladi will take her jewels with her, *sans doute?*"

"My jewels, Pauline! I have none."

"*Mais*, how *stupide!* Miladi has never been even shown her beautiful jewels! Ah, miladi must see them—they are *magnifiques!*"

Pauline brought the richly inlaid case to a table near, and spread the contents of the numerous morocco cases on the cloth. Margery looked at the jewels in silence; she did not touch one of the glittering rings or bracelets, or lift the tiara of diamonds from its velvet throne.

Their beauty amazed, but did not please her; ambition for such things had no place in her nature. She smiled faintly at Pauline's delight and many ejaculations.

"Milord had them all brought down from the manor for miladi. See—she will wear this when she is presented. Does not miladi like them, and the case with the arms and the letters of miladi's name? See—how beautiful!"

"Yes, they are very beautiful," replied Lady Court, quietly; "but I shall not wear them just yet, Pauline."

"But miladi must put on a few rings above her *bague de mariage—mais oui*—just a simple one; it will look better."

Margery hesitated; then, hearing a slight noise, she turned and met her husband's tender eyes.

"Pauline has been showing me my jewels; they are beautiful—too beautiful. I thank you for them all. She tells me that I must wear some rings above my wedding one. Will you put them on?"

Pauline had disappeared on a murmured pretext. Lord Court took the slender white hand in his.

"It wants no rings to enhance its beauty," he said, with a smile; "but Pauline is right—you must do as others do, and wear some to guard this band of gold. I have two that will please you, I think, my darling—two I have intended giving you for the past week."

He touched a small spring in the case and disclosed a little drawer. In this two rings were lying; he took them out.

"This hoop of diamonds, Margery," he said gently, "was my mother's; it is old-fashioned now, and perhaps—"

"Let me wear it," she whispered hurriedly.

In silence he slipped the circlet over the tiny finger, then pressed his lips to it.

"This one you know"—taking up the other. "You have seen it often—the sapphires will match your eyes, sweet—it was Enid's ring."

Tears sprung to Margery's eyes as she looked at the glistening stones, and remembered how often she had seen them flashing on the frail white hand of the dead girl.

"They are sacred to me—I shall treasure them both," she said reverently, then turned aside with trembling lips.

Pauline returned in two minutes, and the jewels were restored to their cases and packed in their iron-bound box for the journey.

Margery, wrapped in her furs, took her last look at the sea, its sullen surface already broken by flecks of white. The vast expanse of dull-green water bordered by the gray sky struck her suddenly with a sense of gloom.

She turned from it with a sigh of relief; and, as she left it, she determined to banish all the dreams and sad recollections it had brought her, burying all memories in its dark unfathomable depths.

So she went away from the quiet village back to London and to life, back to duty, firm in her new-born strength and will.

"Ah, they are happy, milord and miladi both!" sighed Pauline to her companion and fellow-traveler, the earl's

valet. "She is so simple and so pretty—and they have love. Ah, monsieur, how great is that wondrous love!"

The husband and wife sat silent during the greater part of the journey. Margery, resting her head against the cushions, sat with closed eyes. The earl thought she slept, but sleep was far from her. A vague longing seized her that she might step back into the far distant past when she knew neither the greatness of joy nor the bitterness of sorrow. If she could be once more the simple-minded girl living in all contentment her peaceful village life, her studies the one excitement of her days! She was happier then, before she had learned the mystery of her own heart, before childhood had vanished and womanhood had come in its place.

CHAPTER XXI.

It had been Lord Court's intention to travel with his wife straight down to Court Manor, after resting a day or two in London; but the death of his aunt, Lady Merivale, immediately on their arrival, necessitated his presence in town, as her affairs were left in his hands. Margery at first felt disappointed at the delay, but, after a week had passed, she grew content. They had a suite of rooms at the Bristol, and, to Pauline's delight, were in the very heart of London. Horses and carriages were brought up for the Countess of Court's use during her brief stay, and the slender black-robed girl with sweet pathetic face and crown of red-gold hair, provoked universal admiration. The earl had not many near relatives; but such of his connections as were in town paid an early visit to Lady Court, and found their anticipations of dislike turn to wonder at the gracious dignity and sweetness of Margery's presence. She soon learned that her strange romantic marriage was the one topic of the moment in society, that every one was eager to see the unknown girl who had won the heart of Nugent, Earl of Court, so eligible yet so disappointing a *parti*. It gave Margery no pleasure to receive and return the visits of the stately ladies who claimed to be her husband's friends; still she forced herself to do it, as the beginning of her path of duty. Every day, as she drove out, she dreaded to see those two faces whose images she could not banish from her memory; and she would shrink back

in the corner of the luxurious carriage as she passed a riding-party, forgetful for the minute that her own features were hidden beneath the thick black veil which, despite all Pauline's protests, she would wear, forgetful too of the fact that, were she to meet Vane Charteris and Stuart, they would never associate Margery Daw with the Countess of Court. For no mention of her name before her marriage had crept out. The world knew that the earl had taken his sister's companion for his wife, and there its information ended. Miss Lawson and Dr. Fothergill and his wife were alone in the secret, and with them it was safe.

One afternoon, at the beginning of the second week of their stay in town, a trial came to Margery's pride. Lord Court was claimed by the lawyers; and, after a morning spent among her books, Margery prepared for a drive and some visits. Pauline dressed the slender graceful figure in the black garments and fastened the sable mantle while she uttered exclamations of delight at her mistress' appearance. She made a slight protest as the veil was produced; but Margery was firm, and the delicate face with its great blue eyes was completely hidden beneath the thick folds.

The first visit was to an old marchioness who had fallen a victim to Lady Court's charm and sweetness, and Margery made great progress toward friendship. Several ladies were present, and from one and all she received kind congratulations.

"But now I want to beg a favor, dear Lady Court," said the hostess, after awhile; "it is rude of me perhaps, but I hope you will forgive it. Will you not remove that thick veil? We can not see your fair young face; and nature has been so lavish to you, child, you can afford to be generous."

Margery laughed softly, and put up her hand to unpin the veil, when the door opened, and a voice announced—

"Lady Charteris—Miss Charteris!"

Margery felt the blood surge in her ears and a mist rose before her eyes; she saw again the beautiful, cold, cruel creature who had spoken words that stabbed her to the very heart.

She acknowledged the introduction with a slight bend of the head, then, murmuring a few words of regret and farewell, went swiftly from the room to her carriage, her breast full of stormy emotions.

"I am so sorry you did not see Lady Court; she has the face of an angel," said the hostess, as Margery disappeared. "She is very tall," observed Vane, in her most bored manner—"almost too tall for a woman—and she seems to have red hair. I hate red hair," she added, a vision of a sweet girlish face framed in red-gold curls rising before her as she spoke.

"Your taste, dear Vane, is always good," observed the old lady dryly; and then the conversation drifted into other channels.

Margery gave her orders in a quiet stifled voice, and was driven back to the hotel. The fear, the dread she had suffered in anticipation of this meeting was as nothing compared with the agony of pride and pain she now endured. She had thought herself strong, thought she was braced for whatever might happen, and at one blow the barriers she had been building were thrown to the ground, and she was the broken-hearted humiliated girl once again. The sight of Vane recalled all her despair, and knowledge that Stuart—her love—was lost to her forever. She sat in deep thought as the carriage rolled along, and it was not till it drew up at the hotel that she woke from her meditations. Then in a moment came the memory of her position—of her husband. She was now far above such insults, and she had one who would avenge them. The first rush of agitation had died away, and, when she reached her rooms, she paced up and down till her mind was restored to tranquillity.

She would be braver in the future, and, if fate forced her to meet either of those two, she would go through the ordeal unflinchingly. It would be bitter, she knew—for, painful as the sight of Vane Charteris had been, it recalled only wounded pride; with the other her experience would be different, for the sight of Stuart's face would bring back the memory of her unrequited love and despair.

She threw off her mantle and hat, and turned suddenly to the piano. In moments of great emotion music soothed her—it relieved her overcharged heart.

"We know not whether death be good,
But life at least it will not be;
Men will stand sadd'ning as we stood,
Watch the same fields and skies as we,
And the same sea.

"Let this be said between us here—
One love grows green when one turns gray,
This year knows nothing of last year,
To-morrow has no more to say
To yesterday."

"Live and let live, as I will do—
Love and let love, and so will I;
But sweet for me no more with you,
Not while I live, not though I die.
Good-night, good-bye!"

It was a new song sent in with many others by the earl. Margery played it through, and sung the words in a low sad voice, till the passion of the music awoke a chord within her; and then, as she neared the end, her tones rang out clear and sweet through the large room. As the echoes died away the door opened and the footman ushered in a lady. Margery rose quickly, gave one look, then, with a sudden exclamation of pleasure, hastened forward and threw her arms round the new-comer.

"Miss Lawson!" she cried, with honest joy. "I am so glad—so glad to see you once again!"

Miss Lawson kissed the fair cheek in silence, while tears glistened in her eyes. If ever she had doubted the warmth, the generosity, the goodness of Margery's nature for an instant, the genuine pleasure and affection of the girl now would have shamed her. She was still the Margery of old, the sweet loving Margery she knew so well.

"You are glad, child?" she said, quietly. "So am I to see your dear face again; the months have seemed long since you went, though your letters have told me all you have done. You are the same Margery; yet you are changed, dear."

"I am older and—a married woman," Margery responded, with a forced little laugh. "My dignity makes me older. But come and sit with me. How much I have to say, and yet I scarcely know where to begin!"

Miss Lawson let her remove her bonnet and cloak and push her with affectionate hand into an easy-chair in the inner room, close to a blazing fire. With undisguised pleasure her eyes rested on the girlish figure. It was not until Margery had gone from the village that the rectory governess realized how deeply the waif had crept into her heart.

"You are not surprised to see me?" she said, after awhile, as Lady Court seated herself on a stool at her feet.

"I have been thinking of you so much and so often that you seem part of my life. You are come to stay with me, dear Miss Lawson? Yes, yes, you must stay; I shall not let you go."

"I must return to-morrow; Mrs. Carr will expect me. I left Hurstley on purpose to see you, Margery."

"How good of you!" exclaimed Margery, warmly, fondling the worn hand between her two soft palms. "This is just what I wanted to complete everything."

"You are happy?" asked Miss Lawson, abruptly.

"I am content," answered the girl; and her great blue eyes met the gray ones with a steadfast look. "And now tell me all the news. Am I quite forgotten in the village? Do none of them ask for me in Hurstley?"

"Margery, I will be candid with you. When you first went I heard very little about you, you know—I seldom go into the village; but in a very short time the news came that you had gone to Australia with Reuben and Robert Bright. The people were hard, dear, and blamed you. The Brights are heart-broken at Robert's leaving them, and all the fault is laid at your door. They do not speak kindly of you, child; and, when first I heard them, I had great difficulty in holding my tongue. But you had begged for secrecy and silence, and I had given my word. I meant to have written to or seen you, but then came poor Lady Enid's death, your marriage, and your illness. I could do nothing but wait. I have waited; and now, Margery, I have come here for the very purpose of asking you to take the seal from my lips that I may explain to the village and silence the slander."

Margery had risen to her feet, her hands pressed to her bosom, her face deadly pale.

"How cruel the world is," she murmured, bitterly, "how terribly cruel! They know nothing, yet they speak harshly. They do not know how I begged, how I entreated Robert to go back to his home. You remember how stunned I was when first I learned that he had joined Reuben?"

"I know," answered Miss Lawson; "and I would have all the world do you justice. You are now great; let them know you as you are, and crush their calumny. I do not

blame the Brights—their whole life was centered in Robert; but—"

"And for the rest I do not care," interrupted Margery, proudly. "The Brights will hear from Robert soon; and then they will learn the truth and know how they have wronged me. What had I done to the village that at the very beginning of my life they should think ill of me? Oh, Miss Lawson, is the world all like this?"

"The world is cruel, Margery, bitter, hard," the elder woman said, with a sigh; then she added, regretfully, "I am sorry you will not disclose your secret; but you know best, dear, and I have done what I considered my duty."

"You have done as you have done so often—treated me as though I were your own child—and I thank you."

"And have you not been my own?" said the elder woman with a new light of tenderness on her face. "I have seen you spring up from a tiny child to womanhood; I have loved you through all, and I am proud of you. You are to me what the poet says—

> "'For years she grew in sun and shower,
> Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
> On earth was never seen,
> This child I to myself will take;
> She shall be mine, and I will make
> A lady of my own."'

And Nature did that, Margery. No rules of mine could do what she did. You had the germ within you of all that makes a grand good woman, and it has come to perfection."

Margery bent and kissed the lips that spoke the grateful words.

"You always comforted me, dearest, truest friend! Ah, why will you not stay with me always, to be my counselor and guide in the years to come? You have worked so hard, now is your time for rest. Promise me that, when you are tired, you will make your home with me."

"I will come to you whenever I can; but I will not live with you. It would not be wise. Now tell me of all the strange things that have happened since we parted. Thank Heaven, my child, your lot has fallen upon the golden side of life! Your troubles are over, now begins your happiness."

Margery's hand had wandered to her heart-shaped locket,

which day and night she always wore. She raised it, and gazed at the image of her mother's face.

"It seems like a fairy-story," she said slowly, and dreamily. "I wonder does the knowledge that I have so much, that the babe she left alone in the wide, wide world has great riches and lives in luxury make her happy?"

"It would make her happier, dear child," Miss Lawson added quietly, "to see that your companion and friend for life, your husband, is so good and true a man. He is well known to me, Margery. You see, my sister has told me all about his nobleness and worth; and from my heart I congratulate you—more, I rejoice with you."

Margery did not answer; her hand was still closed round her locket, her eyes were fixed on the fire. The light flickering and dancing on her pale lovely face found no smile there, only a depth of pain in the wondrous star-like eyes.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE fortnight's stay of the Crosbie Castle party in town was extended to nearly six weeks; then Stuart escorted his mother home, and Vane Charteris remained in London. She was now thoroughly vexed and wearied. In spite of all her scheming, she was no nearer the goal—indeed she began almost to fear that Stuart would slip through her fingers altogether. She grew cross and worried, driving her mother almost frantic by her return to what she called ill-health. The suspense was really telling upon her, and with the birth of fear came strong determination. For her own pride's sake she must win now—the bitter mortification, the humiliation of failure would be too terrible to bear. Had she not tacitly encouraged the idea that her marriage with the heir of Crosbie Castle and Beecham Park was a foregone conclusion? Already she had experienced the pleasure of seeing envy and disappointment gather on several of her rivals' faces. What barrier now remained? Stuart had, to all outward appearance, blotted the foolish episode of Margery Daw from his memory—there was no other influence to combat hers. Why then did he not wake to the reality and complete her satisfaction? The delay was annoying, the suspense killing.

Stuart, little guessing the workings of Vane's mind, was

recovering gradually from the wound that his heart had received. His reckless mood had gone now, and he was once more his calm manly self; but the happy brightness of his nature was dulled, his light laughter-loving ways had fled forever. His love for Margery had never died; he treasured it now as a beautiful dream, too great a happiness to be realized on earth. The first agony of surprise, doubt, and grief over, he grew to judge her as he judged all women now—he thought of her, not as Margery, the pure, sweet, fresh young girl, but Margery the worldly, selfish, artificial coquette, of the same nature as the fashionable butterflies he met in town. His love for her was a thing apart from her memory; he deemed her unworthy of so great, so true a feeling; he had worshiped an ideal, and he kept that idea still shrined in his heart.

Growing weary of life in town Stuart went back to the castle, thankful for the breath of the fresh country air, the rural quiet. He intended to leave England, to travel once again, but his father's worn face recalled Sir Douglas Gerant's words; and so, with a little sigh, he buried his own wishes, and gave himself up to minister to the parent who loved him so dearly, and whom he treasured in return. To his mother Stuart was a puzzle. Never once was Margery's name on his lips, yet his undoubted love for her, as revealed in their one interview, had considerably startled her. She was surprised at his quietness, his acquiescence in her every wish, grew uneasy at his sudden gravity and the sadness of his face, and almost wished for a display of the strong will which for so many years she had deplored. She too was anxious that his marriage should be arranged, but had made no remark to him on the subject, deeming the affair best left in Vane's able hands.

Stuart had locked the thick letter which Sir Douglas had confided to his care among the few treasures he possessed, and he waited, expecting news from his cousin every day, but none came. At times Stuart grew uneasy; he saw the announcement of the arrival of the vessel in which Sir Douglas had sailed, and yet his cousin made no sign. All he could do was to wait and hope.

He turned his attention to the business connected with the lands and estates of Crosbie Castle, and spent long days with the farmers and laborers, winning their hearts by his warm generous nature, and the interest he took in their

welfare. But this state of things displeased Mrs. Crosbie beyond words. She was an ambitious woman—she longed to see her son enter the world's lists for fame; and to watch him gradually developing into a quiet farm-owner was more than she could bear. It roused her pride to think that her son should have the whole of his life altered through the sentimental folly of a plebeian romance, and she determined to speak to him openly upon the subject of his career on the first opportunity.

It was now about the middle of November, and Stuart was fully occupied with altering and restoring his cottages before the severe weather set in. He went out early and returned late, so that his mother found the desired opportunity long in coming. At last, one afternoon, she perceived him striding up the avenue; and, leaving her boudoir, she met him in the hall.

"Well, mother," said Stuart, smiling, "not out to-day? You are wise—it is ankle-deep in mud. Don't come near me—I am not fit to approach you. I have come back for an agreement I made about Cullam's cottage; I must be off directly."

"What is your hurry, Stuart?" asked Mrs. Crosbie coldly. "Can not you spare me a few minutes? I have long wanted to speak to you, but really you are so much engaged, I have had no chance."

"Of course I am ready, mother, if you wish it," Stuart replied, though not readily; he never cared for these brief intervals of conversation with his mother—they invariably annoyed him.

"Come to my boudoir for a few minutes."

He followed Mrs. Crosbie in silence; then, as she closed the door, he walked to the window and leaned against the ledge.

"Well, mother?" he said, in a tone of impatience.

Mrs. Crosbie stirred the fire, then warmed her white hands. She looked at her son, and the sight of his grave, handsome face strengthened her purpose; it was such a faint likeness to the merry bright face of a few months back.

"Stuart," she began quietly, "I wish to speak to you seriously. Do you intend to lead this kind of life always?"

"What kind of life, mother?"

"This dull, monotonous, farmer-like existence. Have you no aim—no ambition?"

"None," Stuart answered laconically.

His mother moved impatiently in her seat.

"Pray be sensible, Stuart," she said sharply; "you were never like this before. It galls me, it wounds me to see you wasting your days down here, pottering about on the farms, and for what?"

"Some one must look after things, mother; my father can not, and you have often complained to me of the bad management, so I have determined to relieve you of further anxiety."

"Pshaw! Do I want my son to turn steward? I have to-day received a letter from Lady Bayliffe strongly recommending me a manager, and I have all but settled to engage him."

"Then don't do it," promptly replied Stuart. "He is not wanted."

"He is wanted! I shall not allow you, Stuart, to do this kind of work."

"My dear mother, I am of age!"

Mrs. Crosbie was silent, and Stuart, looking up, saw the pain and perplexity on her face.

"Forgive me, mother," he added, moving toward her. "I am very selfish. Tell me what you want me to do, and if it is in my power I will undertake it."

"I want you to rise in the world; I want you to be famous, Stuart."

"Fame is not to be bought, mother."

"It is within your reach. Contest Chesterham at the next election. You will be returned with an immense majority. The rest will follow."

"I have no brains for politics," declared Stuart. "I can not do it."

"There is no such word as 'can not!'" returned Mrs. Crosbie, vigorously. "If I were in your place, Stuart, how differently I would act! You are wasting your life."

Stuart walked back to the window.

"I will not give you a decided answer now, mother," he said. "Give me two days to consider."

"Willingly," she agreed, "and weigh all things well. Remember, you will afford me the greatest happiness in life if you agree to this and to another wish."

"To make you happy, mother, I would do much," Stuart responded, raising her hand to his lips. "What is it?"

Mrs. Crosbie drew a long breath.

"That you will marry."

"Marry!" repeated Stuart, dropping her hand, while his face grew white and his brow darkened. "That, mother, is impossible."

"I have not spoken to you on this subject before, Stuart, though it has been one very near my heart. You have been troubled; but you are not my son if you have not pride sufficient to drown and wash away forever any trace of your trouble. It is not for a Crosbie to submit to insult and humiliation."

"I submit to none!" retorted Stuart, in a quiet, clear voice.

"You have been deceived," his mother declared, coldly and proudly; "by one who was not worthy even a second thought."

"Mother!" he exclaimed, hurriedly, and then stopped. What could he say in defense of Margery? She was, indeed, all this. "Your wish is sudden," he added, after a pause. "It comes to me quite unexpectedly; but I have only one answer to it—I shall never marry!"

Mrs. Crosbie compressed her lips and turned away.

"Just now you called yourself selfish," she observed. "I think you were right."

"Why should I marry, mother?" he cried, suddenly. "You know, or perhaps you can never know, what the past meant to me. I am not a vane to be turned by every wind. I have loved, and I shall not love again."

"What has that to do with marriage?"

"I would not ask any woman to be a wife on such empty terms; it would be a sin. But it is not necessary. I would do anything, mother, in my power to please you; but this I can not."

"Are you my child?" asked his mother, quietly and coldly. "Can you waste your whole life, like a misanthrope, because a village coquette has laughed at and mocked you? There are good women's hearts still in the world, women of our world, who can love and suffer as such creatures never can."

"I will offer no woman my life without my love," declared Stuart, firmly.

"What would you say if I were to tell you that there is one who would take it gladly, one who has watched and worked for you all these months in silence, and who, through everything, is steadfast and true as steel?"

Mrs. Crosbie's hand fell on her son's shoulder as she spoke. She felt it was her last card; it might win the game. Stuart looked into his mother's eyes; a flush rose to his face.

"You mean," he began.

"Your cousin, Vane," she broke in.

"Vane!"

His mother's hand slipped from its hold; but he did not move. He was in a very whirlwind of surprise, pain, and doubt.

"You have not known? No; she hid her secret to well! There is a woman fit to be your wife—proud, loving, courageous, a companion to cheer, a helpmate to stimulate your ambition. Had you not been so blind, Stuart, you might have seen this. What do you say now?"

"I can say nothing," he answered, still in the same low tones. "This has stunned me. You must let me think, mother; I have not the power to speak now."

"Yes, think—and think well," Mrs. Crosbie said gently. Something told her that she had won; Vane's devotion had touched the right chord.

She watched her son move to the door in silence.

"We will speak of this again another time," he said, with constraint.

A wave of compunction passed through Mrs. Crosbie's mind when she was alone. Would Vane, after all, bring him happiness? She had tricked and deceived him. But this momentary feeling was soon lost in the glad thrill of ambition that stirred her breast. Stuart married, and in Parliament, she had nothing more to wish for.

In a maze of troubled thoughts Stuart strode down the wet paths. Vane loved him; and yet she had put her own feelings on one side and ministered tenderly, thoughtfully, kindly to him! What depths of womanly sweetness in such a sacrifice—what a generous noble nature! His heart warmed with gratitude toward her, though it cooled again as he remembered that she loved him. What could he do

—whither turn in this dilemma? Vane was dear to him as a friend, as a sister, but not as the woman he would make his wife. And to make any woman his wife now, when such sadness darkened his life, was almost impossible. What must he do? Could he let her live on alone, with the sorrow he knew from experience to be so bitter wearing out her heart? Would it be a generous return for all she had done, for the noble tenderness with which she had tried to bring him happiness? No, no, a thousand times no! If he could no longer have joy, if gladness were gone forever, he had still the peaceful pleasure of bringing gladness to another's heart. His mother was right—it was his duty to face the world, and Vane should be his wife.

Even while he thought thus, his brow contracted with pain, a spasm of undying regret shot through him, the dream of his first love in all its sweetness returned and inthralled him one more. It was impossible! He paced up and down under the wet dripping trees, trying to calm the tumult in his breast, with a longing for solitude and peace one moment, and a piteous thought of Vane's great love the next. It was a terrible struggle, and it lasted through the night-hours, never ceasing till the dawn, when, pale and worn, yet with a steadfast look of determination about his mouth and in his handsome eyes, he conquered it. He was brave and strong—sorrow could not crush him; but Vane—poor delicate Vane—she could not endure trouble; and so, if indeed his mother had spoken aright, he would go to Vane, and ask her to be his wife.

The gloomy weather in London did not tend to lessen Miss Charteris's despondent mood. She was peevish, bored, discontented, longing to leave England and go to a warmer climate, yet feeling that she could not give up her desire and declare herself defeated. She was waiting only for a week or two to pass, and then she would go down once more to Crosbie Castle and make a final effort. This idea was occupying her mind as she sat one dull wet afternoon gazing out into the dismal streets, with a gloomy look spoiling her pretty face. She heard the door open, but did not stir, imagining it to be her mother. The stillness that followed caused her to turn; and, looking round, she met Stuart's eyes.

"Stuart!" she exclaimed, her face flushing. "You have given me quite a start! I did not know—"

"I have been watching you for the last two minutes, Vane; you were lost in thought. Whose memory were you honoring by such deep meditation?"

Stuart looked very handsome, and something in his manner thrilled her with joy.

"I was thinking of Crosbie," she answered. "Come to the fire, Stuart; you must be frozen. And how is Aunt Constance—and why have you come? I am very glad to see you."

Stuart stood silent, slowly removing his gloves; then he moved nearer to her side by the fire. Vane was looking lovely; the plaintive sadness of her face, which was tinged with a delicate flush, touched him. He had read it well in the first moment of his entrance, and, traced, as he thought, the marks of her trouble.

"I have come to see you, Vane," he told her quietly, "because I have something to ask you."

Vane felt her heart beat wildly.

"Yes, Stuart," she said faintly.

"Vane, you know my inmost heart—you were my confidant, my friend. I want you to continue to be my friend, the best and truest of companions—I want a helpmate, a counselor. I want you to be my wife."

Vane stood silent, her head bent. She felt faint, and, now that success had come at last, she could not speak.

"I can not offer you great love," Stuart went on, taking her hand—"I will not deceive you, Vane—it is buried in the past; but I will give you affection, devotion—true and sincere devotion, if you will accept it. The gift is poor, Vane. Reject it if you will."

"Reject it, Stuart!" murmured Vane, turning her luminous blue eyes on him. "No; I accept it, for I love you—I have loved you through it all, and I am happy at last!"

Stuart pressed his lips to hers; and the compact was sealed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Miss Lawson kept to her word and departed on the following day for Hurstley, despite all Margery's pleading and wishes. The short visit had been a great pleasure to them both. To Margery the very sight of her governess

had brought back a wave of her brief past happiness, and unconsciously soothed her, and Miss Lawson had felt her heart thrill with pride and gladness to see her pupil grown so fair and lovely a woman, and surrounded by all that she could desire. Yet the strange sadness in Margery's eyes would haunt her. What could be the secret that had destroyed her girlishness and brought such an expression to the young face? Miss Lawson pondered this deeply, but could arrive at no solution of the mystery, and indeed would have been no little astonished had she learned what link it was that bound Margery's heart to Hurstley. She knew the girl had been acquainted with Stuart Crosbie; but that fact was not strange, for Stuart had a kind word and smile for every one in the village, and Margery of course shared this general friendship with the rest.

Lord Court had welcomed Miss Lawson warmly and courteously, and even in their brief meeting a mutual liking sprung up between them. The earl was delighted to see the flush of pleasure, called up by her presence, on Margery's face, and he added his entreaties to his wife's to urge the governess to stay longer; but their pleadings were vain, and Margery could only kiss her true friend and let her depart, having first extracted from her a promise of an early visit to Court Manor.

The afternoon on which Miss Lawson left was gloomy and wet, and Margery felt sad and a little lonely as she sat with her books and work. Her husband had gone to the club before luncheon, and she had decided to make the best of a long afternoon when the door opened and he appeared.

"Do you feel inclined to go out, my darling?" he asked, tenderly, bending to imprint a kiss on her brow.

Margery looked up inquiringly.

"Because," he explained, "I should like to take you with me to call on an old friend who is ill. I had no idea he was in England. As a rule, he is wandering round the world in a most extraordinary fashion. But I saw Notteway at the club, and he told me Gerant has been down with rheumatic fever for the last six weeks and was quite alone. So I looked in on him for a few minutes, and, having mentioned my young wife, he pressed me to bring you round to see him, if you had nothing better to do."

"I will go, with pleasure," replied Margery, rising. "Who is he, Nugent?"

"Sir Douglas Gerant. I knew him years ago in England; but we met abroad principally, and I liked him very much. He is a peculiar, almost uncouth, man, but so kind and good—as tender as a woman and most unselfish. For these weeks past he has been very ill; but he would not let his people know, and has been attended only by his servant, who has been his companion in all his travels."

"And he would really like to see me?" queried Lady Court, putting her dainty work into its basket.

"He seemed to wish it. I happened to mention that I was married; and, when I spoke of my happiness, he said, in his old abrupt manner, 'Bring her to see me, Court, if she will not be frightened by such an old savage;' so I came at once. But, if you would rather not go—"

"Oh, I should like to see him!" broke in Margery. "Poor man, all alone! And I have nothing to do this afternoon. I will not be long, Nugent."

With a tender smile the earl watched her graceful figure flit through the door-way; then he walked to the fire-place, and, leaning his back against it, gave himself up to pleasant thoughts. The care-worn look, the expression of trouble and pain, was gone from his face; hope seemed written on every manly feature, and the handsome dark eyes flashed with a light of gladness that spoke plainly of his altered life.

Margery was soon back. She had put on her sables, a round cap of the same rich fur surmounting her red-gold curls, and for once she wore no veil. She had determined to hide herself no longer. She had nothing to fear; it was she who had been wronged and insulted. Pride lent her strength, and she felt that her eyes could meet Vane's clearly and coldly now, even though her heart still ached with the pain Stuart Crosbie had caused.

The earl settled her comfortably in the carriage, and then stepped in himself.

"This weather is terrible," he said, as they started. "Once this law business is settled, Margery, I think I shall take you to a warmer climate, to see the sunshine and breathe the scent of flowers."

"There is one pilgrimage I must make before we do

that,'' returned Margery in a low voice. "I can not rest till I have visited Enid's grave.''

The earl raised her little black-gloved hand to his lips.

"You speak only my heart's thoughts, my own; but I hesitated to take you to the manor in this wet gloomy weather. I thought the sunshine would—''

"Sunshine is beautiful; but the manor is home, and it is near her.''

Margery smiled faintly; she was compelled to speak these words, for she felt almost overpowered by this tender devotion, and suffered miserably as she thought how poorly she could return it. Henceforth it mattered little to her where she lived; but, if her choice of the manor brought him pleasure, she was glad.

"Home!'' repeated Lord Court tenderly. "Ah, Margery, you can not know what a wealth of happiness there is in that word! Thank you, dear, for uttering it. Yes, we will go home.''

They were silent after this till they reached a quiet street in an unfashionable quarter, and presently the earl handed Margery into the door-way of a tall gloomy-looking house.

"Gerant always stays here,'' he said, as they went upstairs. "Will you remain here, my dearest, till I see if he is ready to receive you?''

Margery smiled, and waited in a room that looked cozy and picturesque in the fire-glow. The walls were hung with weapons of all nations; a heterogeneous mass of quaint curious things were grouped in corners; carved and painted gourds were placed here and there, with ivory ornaments and rare bits of china. It presented a strange contrast to the dull, ordinary exterior of the house, and Margery found much to attract her till her husband returned.

"Now, my darling, come with me. Loose that heavy cloak, or you will be too warm; and, if the old man asks you to sing, will you gratify him?''

"With all my heart.''

Lord Court led his wife across a passage, and pushed open a door hung with curtains. The room that she entered was almost dark, but Margery saw a low flat couch pulled near the fire, with a gray head resting on the pillow. She could not see the invalid's face properly, but a faint something in the dark eyes struck her as familiar.

"I have brought my wife to see you, as I promised,

Gerant," said the earl cheerfully, leading Margery to the couch.

"It is kind of you to come, Lady Court," the sick man answered, in a faint, weak voice. "I have known your husband a long, long time—years, eh, Court?"

Where had Margery heard that voice before? It sounded familiar, faint and husky as it was.

"I am very glad to come," she responded simply, and took the chair the servant pushed forward.

"And Margery will sing for you, if you like."

"Margery!" whispered the sick man; and then he tried to raise his head from the pillow. "Margery!" he repeated.

"I think Sir Douglas is ill," said Margery, rather frightened, turning to the servant.

"It is weakness, my lady," returned the man.

"Let me raise him a little," said the earl. "I think he wants to speak." In a lower tone he added to the servant, "He's much weaker than he was this morning; what is it?"

"Spasms at the heart, my lord; his heart is very weak."

"Don't be alarmed, my darling," whispered the earl to Margery. Then he put his arm round the sick man, and raised him easily into a sitting posture.

Sir Douglas tried to murmur thanks, but for a few seconds his weakness was too great. Then, as his strength came back, he stretched out a thin white hand to the girl sitting in the shadow.

"Come into the light," he whispered; "that I may see your face."

Margery slipped her hand into the speaker's weak trembling one, and bent toward him as the earl stirred the fire into a blaze.

The girl's eyes met the sick man's hollow dark ones, which were full of strange eagerness and excitement, and again she seemed to remember them.

Sir Douglas closed his long fingers over hers, and drew her nearer and nearer, till she bent over him.

"Closer," he murmured. "Yes—I—can see—it is! Heaven is—good! You are—"

His strength seemed to fail entirely. Margery bent still nearer as he sunk back upon the cushion, and her heart-

shaped locket escaped and dangled against his withered hand.

"He is fainting!" she said, hurriedly. "Look how pale he is!"

His eyes opened as she spoke, and wandered from her face to the little gold locket. A spasm of pain caused his mouth to twitch; his breath came in gasps; he tried to open the locket, and his eyes spoke words that his lips refused to utter. Then, as the earl drew Margery back, the lids closed over them, and the face became calm.

"It is only a faint. Come away, my darling! I wish I had not brought you; but he was almost well this morning."

Margery suffered her husband to lead her into the other room and place her in a chair. Her nerves were unstrung, and she was full of a vague incomprehensible excitement.

"Go back to him," she murmured. "I am quite well. I can not leave till I know that he is better. Poor man! How strange he looked!"

The earl obeyed her; and, when she was alone, Margery put her hands over her eyes and tried to think what the memory was the sick man had brought back to her.

"Is he better?" asked Lord Court, on his return to Sir Douglas's side. "It was only a faint, Murray?"

The man looked up from his prostrate master, and shook his head sadly.

"It is the end, I fear. May I make so bold as to ask you, my lord, to ring that bell? I shall send to his cousin immediately. Mr. Stuart should come at once. I hope her ladyship is not frightened? Sir Douglas always seemed strange when he heard the name of Margery."

"She is anxious to know how he is. I will take her home, and return as soon as possible. Yes, send for his relatives, Murray. The Crosbies, you say? Well, they ought to come. Poor old Gerant!"

"Thank you kindly, my lord; I will. He will be glad to see you, I know, if he recovers; but I never saw him so bad as this before."

The earl waited till he saw the heavy eyelids raised, then he returned to Margery.

"Yes, he is better, darling," he said, in answer to her eager inquiry. "Come—I will take you home; and then I

will return to learn how he is progressing. Murray is going to send to his people, the Crosbies of Crosbie Castle, and they will look after him."

"The Crosbies of Crosbie Castle!" The words rang in Margery's ears. In an instant she remembered where she had met this man before. She saw once again the hot dusty lane, the lodge-keeper's wife, the strange man who had questioned her so curiously and spoken the terrible words that blighted her young heart, and she knew that Sir Douglas Gerant and that man were one and the same. She stood silent, almost overcome by the conflicting feelings within her breast, and was scarcely conscious that the earl led her down-stairs, and she was driving home.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THAT she possessed some strange magnetic influence over Sir Douglas Gerant Margery did not doubt, but what it was she could not tell; it seemed so vague, so mysterious, and yet her heart was filled with great and unfathomable emotions. What had she in common with Sir Douglas Gerant? Why should he gaze at her so eagerly? She sat very quiet in her carriage, yet every nerve was thrilling.

The earl noticed her manner, but attributed it to the sympathy she felt for the sick man. He regretted now that he had taken her to see his old friend, but Sir Douglas had seemed quite convalescent in the morning, and he had thought the visit might do him good.

On reaching her room, Margery let her husband remove her heavy mantle and her cap without a word; then, as he stood looking undecided beside her, she turned to him.

"Please go back to him. I am all right, and I should like to know how he is now."

"Are you sure you are better, darling? You were quite frightened."

"Yes, yes! Go; perhaps you may be of some service."

The earl stooped and kissed her, and was soon rattling away in a hansom, while she sat silently thinking and wondering over what had occurred.

Lord Court found Sir Douglas restored to consciousness, but too weak to utter a word. Already there was a great alteration in the worn face, and the sick man's eyes,

as they wandered with a restless eagerness round the room, struck the earl with sudden sadness.

"I've sent down to the castle," said Murray, who was watching his beloved master; "and I've also sent to Mr. Stuart's club. He may be in London; if so, he'll come as quickly as he can. I hope he is, for Sir Douglas would like to see him, I know. Many and many a time I've wanted to let Mr. Stuart know, but he wouldn't let me; he was always thinking he'd be better in a day or two, and was longing to be off. He has fretted so through his illness, my lord, it has quite worn him out."

"Have you sent for the doctors?" asked the earl.

"They've just gone, my lord. They didn't say much. 'Give him a teaspoonful of brandy every half hour,' they said; and I know what that means, my lord."

"How wasted he is," thought the earl—"how changed! I wish he could speak; he looks as if he wished to say something."

He bent and asked Sir Douglas if there was anything he specially wanted; but the rigid lips did not move—only the eyes seemed to plead more than before. The earl's presence appeared to give him pleasure, for, if Lord Court moved, the thin trembling hand went out toward him, and Murray construed this into a wish for his friend to remain.

An hour passed without change, and the earl was thinking of sending a message to Margery, explanatory of his long absence, when the door opened, and the sick man's face suddenly altered. He made a feeble attempt to rise, his hands moved restlessly to and fro, and his lips parted to speak, as a young man bent over his couch. It was Stuart Crosbie.

"Cousin," he said, hurriedly, with real pain on his face and in his voice, "my dear cousin, oh, why did not you send for me before?" Then, turning to the servant, he added, "Murray, you should have let me know! Six weeks ill, and I thought him in Australia! It has distressed me more than I can say."

"Sir Douglas would not let me write, sir," replied Murray, as he put the brandy to the invalid's lips. "Lord Court came in to-day, and he's the first person as has been."

"It was a shock to me, too, Mr. Crosbie," remarked

the earl. "Gerant and I have been old friends for years. I am heartily glad you have come."

"You are very kind," said Stuart, putting out his hand; "but can not he have something to give him strength?" Then, turning to the invalid, he added, "You want to speak to me, cousin?"

He knelt down by the bedside as he spoke, and looked eagerly into the sick man's face.

"Sir Douglas has tried to speak, but he can not, Mr. Stuart—yet."

"Hush!" interrupted Stuart, putting up his hand—the pale lips were moving.

"You—will—not forget—"

"My promise?" finished Stuart, gently. "No; everything you wish shall be done."

Sir Douglas fixed his eyes on Lord Court, and a faint sound came from his lips. The earl bent his head the better to hear.

"I can not hear," he murmured sadly to Stuart.

"Give me the brandy, Murray," said Stuart. "Come, that is right; we shall have you well and hearty soon, cousin," he added to the sick man. "Do not distress yourself; I will do all I promised."

Sir Douglas looked at him earnestly, as if his dark eyes would read his inmost heart. Then a change came over his face, and he smiled faintly. His head was raised for a minute from the pillow, and a whisper fell on their anxious ears:

"Gladys—wife—it—has—come—to—Margery—little—Mar—gery—thank—Heaven!"

The voice died away, a convulsive tremor seized the heavy eyelids, which closed slowly over the dark eyes, glazed with a film now, the head sunk back, and with a sigh the spirit of Douglas Gerant fled from its earthly abode.

Stuart knelt on, whilst hot tears were stealing down his cheeks. A solemn trust was confided to his care—of what nature he knew now. The ne'er-do-well, the wandering nature, the truant from home, had not been alone all his life. The name of "wife" passed from his lips as death closed his eyes. Some tale of sadness, of disappointment, was to come, and with it was linked a name that had destroyed Stuart's joy and youth—the name of "Margery."

A strange thrill ran through the young man's frame when at last he rose from his knees. There was now a bond of sympathy stronger than had ever existed in life between himself and his dead cousin.

* * * * * * *

"It is not true! I will not believe it! The whole thing is a romance from beginning to end. Douglas Gerant always—"

"Mother, do not forget you are speaking of a dead man," broke in Stuart Crosbie, quietly and sternly. "I will not listen to such words."

Mrs. Crosbie turned and faced her son. Stuart was leaning against the mantel-piece in a room of a London hotel, his face pale, yet determined. Mrs. Crosbie, dressed in heavy black robes half hidden with crape, was walking to and fro, vexed and wrathful.

"Do you mean to say you will not dispute this iniquitous will?" she asked, sharply.

"Certainly not. I have no right. It is a most just one."

"And you will let Beecham Park pass from your hands into the clutches of some low-born girl who has no more right to it than a beggar in the street?"

"Except the right of a daughter."

"Daughter!" repeated Mrs. Crosbie, with scorn. "There was no marriage, and, even if such was the case, the girl is not to be found; he lost trace of the mother and child for sixteen years, and now has conjured up some romance about a likeness in a village wench."

"Mother, you are not just or temperate. Douglas Gerant has set forth in this letter the sorrow of his life. With his dying lips he claimed my promise to fulfill his wishes, and I shall do so."

"You are mad, Stuart!" declared his mother coldly. "But," she added, with a sneer, "I need not look very far for your motive; it is for the sake of this girl, this Margery Daw, that you are determined to sacrifice everything. Had Sir Douglas seen a resemblance in any other woman, the desire to carry out his wishes might not have been so strong. You have no pride, Stuart, not a—"

"I have honor, mother," Stuart interrupted, his brow clouded, his face stern. "You wrong me and insult me. The past is gone. Why bring it back? I shall do my duty

for Douglas Gerant's sake, for honor, justice, right and truth's sake, and for nothing else. I shall seek out Margery Daw; I have pledged myself to the dead, and shall keep my word."

"And what will Vane say to this quixotic course?"

"Vane is a true-hearted woman; she will say I am right. But, should she not, then I can not help it—I am resolved."

Stuart turned to the fire as he spoke, and looked into the blaze with a pained, weary expression on his face.

"The world will call you mad," observed Mrs. Crosbie, crossing to the window and sinking into a chair, "and Vane will be greatly displeased."

"Vane loves me—so you say," replied Stuart quietly; then he turned to the table, and began to write rapidly.

On the night after Sir Douglas Gerant's death, in the seclusion of his room, Stuart had broken the covering of the packet intrusted to his care, and read the contents. The funeral was over now, and the will read. Beecham Park was left to Stuart, with the proviso that he fulfilled certain conditions contained in a letter already placed in his hands.

The writing was close and crabbed, but it was distinct, and Stuart read it easily.

"When I first decided upon making you my heir, Stuart, I determined to couple that decision with another that would perhaps prove as irksome to you as it has been sorrowful and disappointing to me. But a new influence has since come into my life—hope, sweet, bright, glorious hope, with peace and gladness behind it. Let me tell you my story.

"You will have heard of your cousin Douglas Gerant as a scamp, a profligate, a disgrace. I was wild, perhaps foolish and hot-headed; but, Stuart, I never dishonored my name or my father's memory. My brother Eustace and I were never on good terms. He hated me for my wild spirits, my good looks, and my success with women; and I on my side had little sympathy with his narrow cramped life and niggardly ways; so one day we agreed to part and never to meet except when absolutely necessary. I left him in his dull home at Beecham Park, where his one idea of enjoyment was to scan rigidly the accounts of the estate and curtail the expenses, and went to London.

"From my mother I inherited a small income, which proved about sufficient for my extravagances, and I passed my days with a crowd of boon companions, traveling when and whither I pleased, just as the mood seized me. Among my acquaintances was one whom I held dearer than all; we were bound together by the firmest bond—true friendship. Conway was a handsome fellow, with a reckless, dare-all style that suited my wild nature, and an honest heart; we were inseparable. And next to him in my friendship was a man called Everest, a strong-willed being with a plain face, but having the manners of a Crichton, together with a fund of common sense. Everest was a barrier to Conway's and my wildness, and to him we owed many lucky escapes. We were with one accord railers at matrimony, and a very bad time of it any poor fellow had who deserted our ranks to take unto himself a wife. I laughed and bantered like the others, deeming myself invulnerable; yet, when I laughed the loudest, I fell wounded. My raillery was over, my whole nature changed. The laughter and jokes of my comrades jarred on me; my soul revolted from the lazy, useless life I was leading. I grew earnest and grave—I had fallen in love. I had seen a woman who suddenly changed the current of my life.

"Gladys, my angel, my sweet star! She was the niece of one of my mother's old friends. I rarely visited any of the old set, but one day the mood seized me to pay a visit to a Lady Leverick, with whom as a boy I used to be a great favorite; and at her house I saw my darling. What need to tell you all that followed? I haunted the house, unconscious that Lady Leverick grew colder and colder, heedless of all but Gladys's sweet face and glorious eyes.

"At last the dream was dispelled; her aunt spoke to me. Gladys was an orphan under her charge; she was penniless, dependent on her charity, and she would not have so wild, so dissolute a man even propose for the girl's hand. I was mad, I think, for I answered angrily; but in the midst of the storm came a gleam of golden light. Gladys entered the room, and, in response to her aunt's commands to retire, put out her fair white hands to me, and, leaning her head on my breast, whispered that she loved me, and that nothing should separate us.

"We were married. Lady Leverick refused to see, or

even receive a letter from my darling; and my brother Eustace, in lieu of a wedding-present, sent a curt note informing me that I was a madman. A madman I was, but my mania was full of joy. Could heaven be fuller of bliss than was my life in those first three months? My income was all we had, but Gladys had had little luxury, and we laughed together over our poverty, resolutely determining to be strictly economical. We took a small house in St. John's Wood; and then began my first real experience of life. I sighed over the money I had wasted; but Gladys never let me sigh twice, and always declared that she would manage everything. Out of all my old friends I invited only two to our home, Guy Conway and Hugh Everest; but very happy little reunions we had.

"We were quite alone; and, though Gladys tried over and over again to reinstate herself with her aunt, from affectionate desire only, she failed. Lady Leverick would not see her or own her, and my darling had only me in the wide world.

"How happy I was then! Through Everest's influence I obtained the secretaryship of a good club, and the addition to our income was most welcome and helpful.

"The months slipped by with incredible swiftness and sweetness till a year was gone and our baby born. All this time Conway and Everest were our beloved and most intimate friends, and Gladys seemed to like them both. We christened the child Margery; but she was to me no earthly being—her beauty and delicacy seemed scarcely mortal. She was like her mother, and both were marvels of loveliness, so much so that Conway, who was a bit of an artist, insisted on painting them in angel forms.

"Have you ever seen a storm gather in a summer sky and in one moment darken the brightness of the sunshine with gray heavy clouds? Yes? Then you can conceive how my life was changed by a swift fell stroke that almost crushed my manhood. I was much occupied at the club, and was away from home many hours. Sometimes it struck me, when I returned at night, that my wife's face was disturbed and sad; but the feeling did not last, and as soon as we were together the expression changed.

"One evening I was leaving the club, and, in passing out of the door to enter the cab—I could afford that luxury now—I felt myself touched on the arm, and, turning,

found myself face to face with Hugh Everest. I welcomed him warmly, yet something in his manner sent a chill to my heart.

"'Dismiss your cab, and walk a little way with me; I want to speak to you,' he said. I turned to the cabman and did as my friend wished.

"'Now what is your important business, Everest?'

"'Have you seen Conway to-day?' he asked, abruptly.

"'Conway? Yes. He came to say good-bye; he starts for Monte Carlo to-night. Nothing wrong with him, I hope?'

"'Not with his health.'

"I turned and looked at Everest; he was deadly pale and greatly agitated.

"'If you have anything to tell me,' I said firmly, 'do so at once. I can not stand suspense.'

"'Then prepare for the worst. Conway has gone to Monte Carlo alone; but he will be joined in Paris by a woman to-morrow night. That woman is your wife.'

"My hand flew to his throat, but he was prepared, and pushed me with almost superhuman strength against some railings close by. We were at the corner of Pall Mall, and, suddenly putting his arm through mine, he dragged me toward the steps of St. James's Park. Here it was quiet. I loosed myself from his grasp.

"'You are a coward and a villain!' I exclaimed. 'Your words maddened me at first, but I am sane now. Great heavens, that you should have dared to utter such a lie and be alive!'

"He grasped my hand with his.

"'Keep your head cool,' he said. 'If I had not proof, do you think I should speak as I have done?'

"'Proof!'

"I staggered to the steps and sunk down, burying my face in my hands.

"'This afternoon,' he went on quickly, 'I called at your house. Your wife was in, the maid said, and I entered the drawing-room. I waited several minutes, and then the maid returned, saying that her mistress was not at home after all; and, leaving a message for her, I took my departure. At the gate I picked up this note in Conway's hand; you can see it by the light of this lamp. It says, "Come to my studio at once for final arrangements.

To-morrow I trust will see the end of all your trouble, suspense, and anxiety. Then will come my reward; for you will trust in me henceforth forever, will you not?" I was stunned when I read it,' Everest went on. 'My first impulse was to tear it into shreds and to cast it from me: but I thought of you, Douglas, and a vague sense of danger stayed me. It was still early, and I determined to go to Conway's studio and reason with him—demand an explanation. I went.'

"Everest's voice grew husky for a moment, Stuart, while every word he uttered went to my heart like a knife; my youth died in that moment of supreme agony.

"'I went,' he continued, 'and asked to see Conway; he came to me for a second, looking strangely agitated. I suggested staying with him till he started that evening, but he refused to let me, and hurried me away. I took my departure, ill at ease; for, despite his repeated asseverations that he had much to do, I felt he had a visitor; and my suspicions were only too well grounded, for, on turning my head when I reached the road, I saw your wife standing with him in the studio talking earnestly. Then I came to you.'

"'To crush my happiness!' I exclaimed recklessly. 'It was thoughtful!'

"'You judge me as I feared,' he answered sadly. 'Well, I have done what I considered my duty; the rest it for you.'

"'The rest will be forgotten,' I answered.

"'What—you will submit to dishonor, you will stand deceit! You will receive her kisses to-night remembering her lover's this afternoon! You are no longer a man, Gerant!'

"His words fanned the flame of my jealous passion to madness. Hitherto I had spoken mechanically, remembering my wife's purity and sweetness; but at his taunts the blood in my veins became like fire. I wanted nothing but revenge.

"Everest tried to calm me, but it was useless; he had set the match to a train that would not be extinguished.

"The remainder of that night is like a hideous nightmare to me. I can see myself now hurrying him from the steps to the street and into a cab. I can remember how sharp was the pain at my heart when I repeated the vague

yet self-condemning words of Conway's note. I can see again the houses seeming to fly past us as we dashed homeward. I can feel again the agony I endured when, in answer to my hoarse inquiry, the maid said my wife was not at home. Again I can feel the agony of suspense, rage, madness I suffered as I strode up and down the road before the house, with Everest standing a little way off, watching me with a calm anxious face, till the sound of light feet came to our ears, and I stood before Gladys.

"I can see her pale startled face, her shrinking form, as in a suppressed voice I demanded to know where she had been. She did not answer at once, and her hesitation maddened me. I lost all manliness, Stuart. It haunts me now—the misery of her face, the pleading of her lips. But I would listen to nothing. In a flood of passionate words I denounced her, thrust aside her hands when they would have held me, and then, telling her we should never meet again, I rushed away, leaving her dumb and pallid as a figure of stone.

"Once I turned to go to her—a moment of remorse in my madness—but Everest pushed me on, and so we parted. Everest never left me all night; he took me to his rooms, and sat watching me like a mother, with his grave face and strange earnest eyes. I was waiting only for the morning; then I started for Paris—for Conway and revenge!

"Gladys I would never see again. I left my money and the settlement of my affairs in Everest's hands in case of my death, and he promised me to look after Gladys; for, though I deemed her dishonored, I could not let her starve. He was anxious to stay in England, but I kept him beside me and refused to let him go.

"I crossed to Paris the next day, and sought everywhere for Conway, but could not find him. Everest grew impatient, but still I would not release him; and two days passed without incident. On the third day I learned that Conway had never left England, that he was seized with sudden and severe illness at Dover; and, when I reached that place, he was dead.

"Robbed of my revenge, I sunk into gloomy despondency. Everest went to London to look after my wife. My body seemed paralyzed; I seemed no longer a man. My friend was away a week, and then returned suddenly and

told me, with a strange pale face, that Gladys was gone—had disappeared with her child, and could not be found.

"My misery was so great, I scarcely realized the horror of this. My brain was dulled by intense pain. As in a dream I listened to him, hardly heeding him, and conscious only of a vague relief as he left me to go abroad, to shake off, he said, the anxiety he had suffered.

"I stayed on another week or so at Dover, still in the same condition. Then my brain suddenly cleared; but my misery returned in greater force. I was mad once more with an agony of pain. I left Dover; it was hateful to me. I traveled to London. A longing, a craving seized me to see Gladys, to look on her once more, though she was dead to me forever. I drove to the house; and the memory of Everest's words came back to me then—that she was gone. Pale and faint with anxiety, I alighted at the well-known gate, and I saw at a glance that the house was deserted.

"What had become of Gladys? How had she managed? Was she starving—lost in London, with not a friend in the world? In an instant my rage was quenched. I saw her only in her sweetness, her beauty, and I leaned against the gate, overwhelmed with the flood of miserable thoughts that crowded upon me.

"But it was not a time for dreams. I felt I must act. So I hurried to the house-agents, feeling sure that they could tell me something. From them I gleaned the barest information. My wife had visited them early in the morning following that dreadful night, paid them the rent to the end of the quarter, and left the key. I questioned them closely and eagerly, but could gather nothing more, and then I went away, feeling like a man whose life was almost ended. Over and over again I whispered to myself, with a twinge of remorse, that Gladys was innocent, and would have explained all if I had only let her. Then the memory of Everest's words, the damning evidence of Conway's note, returned, and I knew not what to think; but on one point I was certain—henceforth life held no duty for me till Gladys was found. Though the golden dream of our joy was ended, though I doubted her, she must be found and cared for.

"I began a search—a search, Stuart, that has lasted all my life. By good hap at this time a distant cousin, dying,

bequeathed me his property, which, though not large, came like a godsend at the moment, for every available penny I had had been expended in my search. I was haunted by my wife's pale horror-stricken face gleaming in the moonlight, by the memory of my baby-child, whose prattle had sounded like music in my ears. I knew too well the miseries, the horrors, of London, and I could not bear to think that the woman I had held so near and—Heaven help me!—still treasured in my heart, was thrown into its terrible jaws and left to perish without a helping hand.

"I pray Heaven, Stuart, you may never know the darkness of those days, the unspeakable anguish, the depth of despair! Weeks passed. I could find no trace, and when I was tortured with the conflicting emotions which surged within me an event occurred that put the last stroke to my misery, added the ghastly weight of a wrong to my burden, a wrong which I could never wipe away.

"I had resigned my post at the club, and, in my eager restlessness, wandering about the London streets, either alone or with one of my detectives, I was lost even to the remembrance of the frequenters of my old haunts. One day, however, I met a man who had been very friendly with me, and in the course of conversation—I would gladly have avoided him if I could—he told me there were several letters awaiting me at the club. None knew where to send them.

"I went for the letters, urged by a wild hope that Gladys might have written. She had. It was a letter that is graven on my heart in characters of blood. Heaven give me strength to tell you; for even now, after so many years, I grow faint when I think of it! It was a long, hurriedly-written letter—the letter of a distraught woman. I will not give it to you here; there were no reproaches, but there was a clear statement of facts given by a broken heart. In my anxiety I could scarcely read the first lines, but some words further on caught my eyes, and held them as by magnetic power. They spoke, Stuart, of the persecution she had endured for weeks from Hugh Everest. Again and again, Gladys wrote, she felt urged to speak to me, but she knew I valued him as a friend, and she trusted that his honor, his manliness, would overcome his baser feelings, and that he would go away. Of Guy Conway she

spoke tenderly and earnestly. The letter I had brought forward as a proof of their guilt was indeed written by him; but it referred to a painting he was engaged upon of herself and her child, which she had intended leaving at her aunt's house, hoping that the sight of the baby's angel-face would break down the icy barrier which caused her such pain. This had been a little plan of his, suggested when he saw how the estrangement troubled her. She was at Conway's studio, but only for the purpose of discussing the delivery of the picture; and, catching sight of Hugh Everest, in a moment of agitation and dislike she openly expressed a wish not to see him. Conway at once undertook to prevent their meeting, with what terrible result you know. My wife ended her letter by stating that she was gone from my life forever with her child. The shock of my suspicions had destroyed all joy or happiness evermore for her; but, though separated, she would live as became my wife and the mother of my child, for whose sake alone she could now endure life. This ended it; there was no sign, no clew, no word to lead me to her.

"I was not a man, Stuart, when I had read that letter; I was a brute—a savage animal. Had Hugh Everest been near me, I should have torn his cruel heart from his body, and his tongue from his false, lying lips. A fury seized me to find him—find him, though I searched the world round; face to face with him, I could breathe out the passion, remorse, revenge, scorn, and agony of my bursting heart. But I could not leave England till I knew where my darling was, my sweet, wronged angel—till I had knelt in the dust at her feet, and bowed my head in shame; and so my search went on.

"Years passed, but only a slight clew turned up now and then, always with the same ending. I have wandered—led by these disheartening clews—from one country to another; and at last the men I employed grew weary, and I had to work alone. But I was kept alive by my love and my desire for revenge. Everest never came to England—coward and villain—but the day came, a day not long past, when we met, and on his dying bed I forced him to confess his wrong and own his deceit. Then, when he was gone, the misery of my wasted life returned, and I sunk for a while beneath my load of care.

"Hope was almost dead forever when I visited you at

Crosbie; and then suddenly by one of those strange, unexpected chances that come to us at times, it burst into a living, glowing flame once more. All through the past years I had prayed that, should Gladys be gone, my child might be spared; and, Stuart, my prayer was granted. At Crosbie one morning I came face to face with a girl at sight of whom I seemed to have stepped back into the past. I was startled by the image of my sweet wife. I spoke to the girl, learned her name—Margery Daw— and not until she had gone did hope wake in my breast, bringing once more the feeling of eager gladness that I thought dead forever.

"I waited a day or two, but quietly made inquiries, and obtained all the information I wanted; then, having first tested the truth and honesty of your nature, I determined to confide all to you, and claim my child; for that she is my child there is no doubt. But happiness was not to be grasped at once; again fate was unkind. When I made my way to the cottage where Margery lived, it was to find her gone—gone across the sea to Australia. The sudden pain and disappointment aside, I was myself again. Australia was nothing to me; I would start at once, and clasp my child yet in my arms before I died.

"So, Stuart, I leave this in your hands. If I succumb, seek out my Margery and give her her rights. To you I leave all, for I know you will do as I wish; and remember she is your cousin and your equal. Guard her, Stuart, from harm, if it be in your power, and may Heaven bless and reward you for all you may do! It will be necessary to explain how I discovered Margery to be my child. As I told you, I made most minute inquiries, learning all particulars from people both in Chesterham and Hurstley. I sought for Dr. Scott, the medical man who had attended during the railway-accident; he had left Chesterham many years before, but he remembered the incident well, and his description of the poor dead woman only confirmed my hopes and fears. Acting upon his advice, I went to Newton, and by dint of money and able men traced my darling's life during two long years of misery. The story of her sufferings, of her daily toil, her heart-broken life, I can not dwell on. Heaven grant you may never know the terrible agony of hopeless remorse and longing that I am now enduring! Despair seizes me when I remember my madness, her wrong—my angel-wife! Even the joy of finding

my child can not bring me peace. The happiness I experience in the knowledge of her existence is tinged with never-dying bitterness and sorrow, for she recalls her mother.

"But I weary you with my moans, Stuart; let me get on with my story. Gladys then, without a friend in the world—for her aunt would have nothing to say to her, being especially bitter when she learned we were separated—doubted and wronged, had, in addition to her other troubles, the hardship of poverty to face. She struggled to get employment, with little success however; from time to time she managed to make money by teaching, but this never for long. Still, through all her trials, her courage never forsook her; she lived for her child. I have spoken with some who knew her in those days; they dwelt on her sadness, her sweetness, her innate refinement, little knowing how their words rent my heart. It would be useless to describe the hopelessness, the misery of her life; she parted with all her jewelry, and at last in desperation answered an advertisement for a situation as maid.

"Beyond this I can not write positively, but my heart tells me the truth. The situation that Gladys had obtained meant separation from her child. She had heard me speak of my cousins the Crosbies; and I am convinced she was on her way to seek protection from your mother and shelter for the baby before taking up her new duties, when death claimed her and ended her sorrows.

"I inclose with this letter the certificates of our marriage and of Margery's birth. My lawyers have in their possession a small box, which after my death they will hand to you. It contains the jewelry that belonged to my wife. Give it to Margery. And now, Stuart, I have finished. Pray befriend and guard my child as far as lies in your power. My heart is full of gratitude when I think of the good kind women who took her, a weak, helpless babe, and tended her so well. I have written to Lady Cunningham words of gratitude that sound empty compared with the feelings that prompt them; would that I could have done so to the others—Mrs. Grahame and Mary Morris! But Death has garnered them, and the power is taken from me. One thing more, Stuart—lay me beside Gladys in the little country church-yard where kind strange

hands laid her; though in life we were separated so ruthlessly, let us in death be together."

Stuart had sat long after he had read the letter, his heart aching with pity for his dead cousin. The tale of sorrow was so heavy that for a time it banished his own grief; but, as he rose and paced the room, the memory of his duty brought all back clearly, and he saw the bitterness of the task before him. A faint wave of gladness for her sake was checked by the reflection that they were parted forever. Still he would be firm; he was pledged to the dead, and, even were the pain deadly, he would keep his word, seek out Margery, and give her her rights as his cousin and heiress to Beecham Park.

The news that caused Mrs. Crosbie such wrath and annoyance brought alarm and fear unspeakable to Vane Charteris's breast. This unexpected blow following on her unexpected success almost crushed her by its suddenness. Stuart would meet Margery, learn the truth, and she would be humiliated and disgraced. Moved by her anxiety, she added her voice to his mother's, and endeavored to shake his determination to sail for Australia. She did not betray herself by word or look; she only spoke prettily of her loneliness, and of how it would be a wiser course to send out an agent to the antipodes in search of his new cousin, and not to go himself. She stored her speech with references to Margery's faithlessness, hoping they would take effect; but it was all to no purpose. Stuart was firm, and refused to be turned from his determination. Had his father added his voice to the others, he might have yielded; but the squire was eager that Stuart should fulfill his promise, and declared truthfully that his health was so much stronger that his son might leave him without any hesitation. So, instead of the clear sky which Vane had pictured to herself, clouds were gathering on all sides, and fear planted thorns at every step in her path, making her faint with apprehension and dread of exposure and disgrace.

CHAPTER XXV.

MARGERY was strangely affected when she learned that Sir Douglas Gerant was dead. She could not banish from her mind the thought that in some way her presence had caused him distress. The earl saw her pained face, and im-

mediately determined to put all business affairs aside and take his wife down to Court Manor. So, on the afternoon following her visit to the late baronet, Margery was carried away from London to her new home.

When she arrived it was too dark for her to see her surroundings; but the pure freshness of the country air, the silence after the bustle and noise of the London streets, the faint soughing of the wind in the trees, brought a thrill of peace and gladness to her, and as she stood at the low wide door and gazed around the quaint rambling hall she looked so pleased and comforted that the earl's heart rejoiced. It was a delightful old-world place. The corners and crevices, the rooms filled with serviceable furniture of no modern date, the smell of the flowers, the glow of the fire-light—all seemed to speak of home. It was a haven of rest and quiet after the storm of the past few months. And if at night this feeling came, it was even stronger in the morning. As she drew her curtains aside and looked out over the wide vista of country Margery gave a little sigh of relief. Here she had nothing to fear, nothing to remind her of the past; here it would be easy to forget and grow content.

The pain that contracted Nugent's heart as he stood once more in his old home ceased when he saw the glow of hope, love, and happiness on his wife's delicate, lovely face, and he pictured to himself a future all brightness and gladness. In both their hearts, as they entered the house, the same memory lived—the memory of Lady Enid. Margery sent up a little prayer to Heaven that she might prove grateful to the man whose heart was so tender and true, whose sufferings had been so great, and he mutely thanked his angel-sister that ere she went she bequeathed so great a treasure to him as Margery.

His whole being was so impregnated with his great love that he had failed to discover the true cause of Margery's passive gentleness. It was true he did not think her heart held so deep a love as his own; but she was young, the marriage was hurried, love must have time to grow. In time his great devotion must reap its reward. The liking she now had would change to love. He must be patient and wait. So he reasoned in his happiness, dwelling with a thrill of joy on the memory that Margery had neither relatives nor friends. This girl, the star of his life, had none

but him to tend her, none but him to whom she could turn. The pleasure that Margery showed in her new home struck the final chord of happiness in his heart.

The girl found much to occupy her in her new position, and her lovely face and kind words soon won the servant's hearts, already disposed to love her for her gracious influence over their master.

It was about the end of the week that Margery learned accidentally from her husband that he had neglected his business in town on purpose to bring her away, and, without a moment's hesitation, she begged him to return and complete his arrangements. The earl demurred, but at last, satisfied that she would not be lonely, he agreed, and departed, leaving many tender injunctions with her to take great care of herself in his absence.

The young wife felt a pang of remorse at the relief and pleasure she experienced when quite alone. She struggled hard with herself day and night; but to forget was so hard, and to remember so easy. Though she was surrounded by all that the world holds dear, she found no satisfaction in her wealth; her mind was lost to the present—it would persistently wander to the past—that past which, despite its pain and humiliation, was so sweet. The return to the country had brought back so much that was linked with her brief love-dream that the struggle seemed to grow greater day by day.

Pauline noticed her mistress's grave sad face, but attributed it to his lordship's absence, and, to cheer her. would repeat the servants' tales and anecdotes of his goodness, little thinking that every word went to Margery's heart like a sword thrust. She regretted with a deep unspeakable grief that she had been silent with Lady Enid; had she but spoken of Stuart and of her unhappiness, all would have been different, and she would not have pledged her vows to this man, the depth of whose generosity, tenderness, and devotion touched her with acute pain. If she could but give him in return one half the love he bestowed on her, she would be happier; but her love was dead, buried in a past summer dream, and she had nothing left for him.

"The loves and hours of the life of a man,
They are swift and sad, being born of the sea—
Hours that rejoice and regret for a span,
Born with a man's breath mortal as he—

Loves that are lost ere they come to birth,
Weeds of the wave without fruit upon earth,
I lose what I long for, save what I can—
My love, my love, and no love for me!

"It is not much that a man can save
On the sands of life, in the straits of time,
Who swims in sight of the great third wave
That never a swimmer shall cross or climb—
Some waif washed up with the strays and spars
That ebb-tide shows to the shore and the stars,
Weed from the water, grass from the grave,
A broken blossom. a ruined rhyme."

Yes, that was all that remained now, "a broken blossom, a ruined rhyme." Her life might be sweet again, but it would never be as it was on that evening in Weald Wood, when her young heart was first touched by love.

Lord Court was absent two days; then he suddenly announced his intended return. Margery was wandering in the gardens and the pleasance when Pauline brought the telegram to her. With a vague sense of apprehension, Margery tore it open.

"Your master returns to-night, and brings a guest. Tell Mrs. Perry to see that the rooms are prepared, Pauline."

Pauline nodded her head in a self-satisfied manner.

"I am glad. Milord will be welcome; it is so gloomy here for miladi alone. Ah, and miladi will make a grand toilet to-night?"

"I leave myself in your hands, Pauline," returned Lady Court, with a faint smile, which vanished when she was left alone.

Her husband was returning again! Once more she would suffer the agony of pain and remorse in his presence; but she must be strong, and remember only her duty and how much she owed him.

The afternoon wore away, and evening was drawing on. It was dark and gloomy, one of those unpleasant days that come in November. Margery walked to and fro, till she was wearied, and then turned into a small room that she had chosen for her boudoir. She gave the order for the carriage to be sent to meet the earl, and sunk down before the fire, resting her head on a low velvet chair. She wore a heavy mourning-robe, simple yet costly, and her delicate

face and throat gleamed with so dark a setting. She was altered from the Margery of the summer, yet her face was only a child's face. Her youth, the purity of her countenance, her deep sapphire eyes her curly silken masses of red-gold curls, were the admiration of Pauline. She brought her mistress some tea, served in fragile Sèvres china, and then stood for an instant and looked down on the face that was so fair in the fire-glow.

"Miladi is tired," she said, sympathetically; "she walks so much."

"I am a little weary," Margery answered, waking from her thoughts; "but that is ended now, I hope."

She spoke to herself more than to the maid; her mind was on the one subject that had engrossed her all the afternoon. Pauline smiled; she thought she understood the meaning of her words.

"Ah, milord is to return!" she decided, and went away to her room.

Margery sat on before the fire. The tea had revived her, yet she seemed strangely agitated as the time drew near for her husband's arrival. A vague sense of approaching trouble had come over her, and she put her hand to her heart to try to stay its quick, hurried beat. She had been thinking so deeply that her nerves were unstrung. The solitude had tried her, she told herself; yet, even as she whispered this, her heart began to flutter again. It was a strange, incomprehensible feeling, a feeling she had never experienced before, and she longed for, yet dreaded, her husband's return.

At last the sound of wheels caught her ear, and she rose from her seat.

"I will be firm—I must forget!" she whispered. "My love, good-bye, good-bye!"

Then she heard the sound of voices in the hall and knew that her husband was close at hand. She turned to greet him as the door opened, and in the dim light she saw two men enter.

"Margery, my wife!" said Nugent's grave, tender voice; and his lips touched hers.

His companion not coming forward, the earl still holding Margery's hand looked around.

"I have brought a friend home, darling. It is only a flying visit, as he is off to Australia; but I persuaded him

to come for a few days. There will be a bond of friendship between you through poor Gerant. Crosbie, let me introduce you to the Countess of Court."

The stranger moved forward mechanically into the light. Margery's hand grasped her husband's. She raised her eyes, and, with a sudden agony of pain, saw her lover, Stuart, before her.

She tried to offer her hand, but the effect was too much. A mist dimmed her vision, her brain reeled, and she fell to the ground, pale and unconscious, at her husband's feet.

Pauline rushed in as the bell rang loudly. She pushed aside the earl as, in terror and alarm, he knelt beside his wife, never noticing that Stuart Crosbie stood silent in the center of the room, his hand grasping a chair.

"It is nothing!" cried the maid, raising Margery's beautiful head. "Miladi will walk, and bring the fatigue. Miladi has been *désolée* in milord's absence, and now it is the joy. See, she recovers, milord! Leave me with her alone. She will be well."

CHAPTER XXVI.

At midnight, while the clouds were driven across the moon by the wind, Stuart Crosbie sat in his chamber at Court Manor, his arms folded, his head bent dejectedly upon his breast. He was stunned by the strange events of the past day. He could never tell how he had borne himself through the long evening, though every incident was graven on his heart forever. He could not grasp the meaning of what had taken place. He met the earl at his club, having a little time to spare before the vessel sailed, and he accepted Lord Court's invitation with a vague feeling that he should escape the reproaches, mute and open, which otherwise he must hear in town. The earl had taken a sudden liking to the young man; and, some rumor reaching his ears as to Stuart's proposed voyage to Australia, he begged the nephew of his old friend to honor him with a short visit before his departure. So Stuart had assented, hardly heeding whither he went, his mind occupied with the task before him to find his cousin Margery; and in the twilight, with the fire-light revealing her loveliness, he had,

with a shock that stunned him, come suddenly face to face with the girl he sought the girl he loved.

It was so strange, so incomprehensible. A feeling of acute pain came to him. At the sight of Margery his love rose up again in all its vigor, full of bitterness and despair, however, for she was a wife. He sat on in the chill night hours, his brain full of disturbing thought. The mystery, the suddenness of the whole thing seemed to stun him, to crush his very being. During the whole evening he had sat listening to his host's voice, and answering in monosyllables. Margery did not appear; of that he was only too distinctly conscious. The rest was a blank. And now he was alone, bewildered, tormented by pain, despair, love. His journey was ended before it had commenced, for he had found Sir Douglas Gerant's daughter, found the owner of Beecham Park. In the morning he must unfold his tale, and then—go from her forever.

He rose, and approaching the window, opened it. How came Margery hither? he asked himself. What strange fate had brought him to her at that very moment? What story would he hear on the morrow? Had he wronged—doubted his love? A cold shudder seized him at the very thought. With an effort he put it from him. What could Margery say in self-defense? She had deceived—cruelly deceived him. Whatever the cause, he could not forget that. What explanation would she give him? Perhaps none; and he had no right to demand any. The difficulties of the situation seemed to become greater and greater as he pondered it in his mind. He moved from the window, and walked slowly up and down the room. Margery, the girl he had loved, trusted, revered, the girl he was about to seek in a far-distant clime, was under the same roof with him at that very instant, the wife of his host, the Earl of Court. It was inexplicable. His mind could find no solution to the problem; he could but wait for morning light.

Stuart was not the only one who was awake and disturbed that night. Margery, clad in a silk dressing-gown as white as her cheeks, was pacing the floor of her chamber. She had pleaded illness, and begged to be left with Pauline; and, once alone, she sent her maid into the dressing-room and fought the battle with herself in solitude. If sorrow, despair, anguish, had come to her before, they visited her now with redoubled force. It seemed to her

the very irony of fate, a mockery of her good intentions, that she should be so tried at such a moment—a moment when she had thought herself a conqueror over her weakness. Of what avail had been her struggles, her earnest prayers, her resolutions? The sight of Stuart's grave handsome face, the intoxication of his presence, had left her weak; the memory of his insults, his deceit, had banished everything but the knowledge that she loved him still. She longed for the weary night to pass, yet dreaded the coming of morning, when she must meet him, speak to him, when his every word would be as a dagger thrust into her heart.

Dawn was creeping over the sky when, thoroughly wearied and ill, she flung herself upon her bed. As she lay, her eyes fell on the sapphire ring that she wore, and the memory of Enid—her patience, her suffering, her courage—stole into her heart. Then her mind wandered to her husband, and to all his great goodness; and, remembering this, she sent up a fervid prayer for strength to do her duty to this man; and, as the sighing plea left her heart, she grew comforted.

"And grief shall endure not forever, I know;
As things that are not shall these things be;
We shall live through seasons of sun and of snow,
And none be grievous as this to me.
We shall hear, as one in a trance that hears
The sound of time, the rhyme of the years;
Wrecked hope and passionate pain will grow
As tender things of a springtide sea."

* * * * *

Stuart left his room early, and despite the cold, gloomy morning, made his way into the grounds to think, and nerve himself for the coming ordeal. He looked pale and wan; his eyes had never closed all night, his restless thoughts had never left him. His task was ended, he told himself—his cousin was found. He must just state the truth, and then go away from her fair, false sweetness back to the long, straight path of duty, back to the woman who had loved him so long and so well, back to his pledged word and the burden of life.

He was walking to and fro beneath the leafless trees, his heart almost as dead and withered as the leaves beneath his feet, when a cheery voice hailed him, and, turning, he saw the earl.

"You are out early, Crosbie," cried Lord Court, as he approached. "I saw you from my windows." Then, in a tone of surprise, he added: "But you look ill: is anything the matter?"

"I did not sleep well," returned Stuart, hurriedly, "for I have had a shock. I am going to tell you all about it."

"A shock!" repeated the earl, with the smile. "Don't say the manor is haunted. I believe it is most unorthodox not to have a family ghost, but I have never heard yet that we have one."

"It is not a ghost! it is a reality. I meant to have spoken to you last night, but I was so surprised that I could hardly realize the truth of what I saw. I will explain now."

"Come in-doors," said Lord Court, looking a little bewildered; "it is scarcely sultry out here. Now, Crosbie, I am all attention—begin," as they entered the house.

"You are aware I was about to start for Australia next week. Do you know why?"

"No," answered the earl; "and, to tell you the candid truth, I was just a little puzzled as to the cause of your hasty departure."

"It was to fulfill a wish of my dead cousin, Douglas Gerant. He left a daughter; it was in search of her I was to sail on Thursday next."

"A daughter! Why, I never knew Gerant was married!"

"It was a secret," said Stuart; "but I have the whole history in a letter which he confided to my care. Now comes the strange part of the story. This daughter was thought to be in Australia, was even traced to that part of the world, when suddenly, as I am about to start to find her, by one of those extraordinary turns of fate, I come face to face with the cousin I seek—here—in your house!"

Lord Court stood still and looked at Stuart earnestly.

"In my house!" he echoed, slowly, as if doubting his ears. "Who is it?"

"Your wife."

"My wife—Margery! You are jesting!"

"Jesting!" repeated Stuart, grimly. "I was never so serious in all my life! Sir Douglas Gerant's lost daughter bore the name of Margery Daw. She was placed in a home in Hurstley—my native village. Evidence was forthcom-

ing that she had gone to Australia with Reuben Morris, the husband of the woman she had called mother. I knew her well; and last night, when I came face to face with her, I was overwhelmed by the discovery that Margery Daw and the Countess of Court were one and the same person."

Lord Court passed his hand across his brow.

"I can not think clearly yet," he said, slowly; "the news is rather sudden." He paused for a little. "There is no mistake—you are sure?"

"I am sure," answered Stuart, emphatically.

The earl was silent for a minute, then his face cleared and brightened. He put out his hand to Stuart, who grasped it silently.

"I can think and speak now. My darling has found her rights, and she is your cousin. The feeling of friendship for you which came so strongly to me, Crosbie, has now a solid basis beneath it. How happy she will be! And yet it is sad, at one and the same moment, almost, to find a father and to lose him. Fate must have led her to his bedside on that day. Thank Heaven he saw her once before he died! Come—let us go in and tell her. Words seem so feeble to-day that I can not express half of what I feel. The mystery of her birth has hung over my darling like a dark cloud; and now by Heaven's mercy it is gone, and she will be free and happy."

They turned and walked in silence along the hall. Pauline was tripping down the stairs.

Miladi is in the south room—she would attend the *déjeuner*," the girl said; and the earl walked quickly down a long corridor to a door hung with heavy curtains.

"We will tell her now," he whispered; and in another moment they were in the room.

Stuart's vision was obscured for the first few seconds, then it cleared, and he saw a slender, graceful girl with fair pale cheeks and a wreath of red-gold curls before him. She had her hand clasped in the earl's; and, as his senses returned, Stuart saw her deep-blue eyes grow dark with surprise, and her face become whiter than the folds of the heavy serge gown that draped her.

In a soft, low voice, tender and passionate, the earl told her all; and Margery stood beside him, hearing nothing save the words:

"Sir Douglas Gerant's daughter, the cousin of Crosbie, my friend."

Stuart drew back while the earl murmured soothing words in her ear, and she gradually awoke to the reality.

"He was my father," she said, dreamily; then, with a sudden rush of remembrance—"Ah, now I understand all!" She sunk into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Presently she rose, saying to the earl, "Tell me everything."

Lord Court put his lips to her hand.

Crosbie will do that, my darling; he is your cousin now, you must remember. Give him your hand, and bid him welcome to your home as your kinsman and your friend; you were too ill last night to do so."

Margery's heart seemed to stand still; then, nerving herself for the effort, she stretched out her hand.

"You are welcome, cousin," she said, in a faint voice.

Their fingers met for an instant, then dropped apart; and Margery turned away, feeling that the agony of this meeting was almost greater than she could bear.

The earl drew her gently toward him. She was too weak to offer any resistance—was even glad of the support; and, standing with her husband's arm around her, Margery heard the story of her father's sorrow and her mother's martyrdom slowly but distinctly from Stuart Crosbie's lips. The words went home to her heart; the despair, the misery, caused her unspeakable pain; and tears rained from her eyes.

The earl, wrapped up in his thought for his wife, took no notice of Stuart's agitation and pallor. He did not think it strange that the young squire of Crosbie Castle should have been so surprised at seeing Margery. His sister had told him the girl's history, as she had heard it from Miss Lawson, and, remembering that his wife had been called a village girl, it was not likely her actions would be known at the castle. He only felt a great wave of gratitude and happiness fill his heart. The mystery of her birth solved, Margery would now be content, and there would be no barrier to their complete happiness.

As Stuart spoke of Beecham Park, Margery raised her head.

"The estate is mine?" she said, slowly.

"You are the next heir," answered Stuart.

"Therefore you are a great lady," put in Lord Court, smiling. "Beecham Park is one of the finest places in England. But come, Crosbie; sit down. This has been a morning of surprises, but we must eat, or we shall sink beneath them altogether. You must pay us a long visit now, for you have no reason to go—has he, Margery? When there was Australia to consider, it was another thing."

So the earl chatted on, eager to rouse Margery from the dreams into which she had fallen; and with a glance at Stuart he adroitly turned the conversation and plunged into other topics.

Margery sat silent. She could not eat—her brain was in a whirl; and at last she could bear her distress no longer, and with a murmured apology she went slowly to the door.

"Yes, rest, my darling," said Lord Court, as he followed her—"this news has been too much for you; but, beofre you go, tell your cousin that if he departs it will be at the risk of your grave displeasure."

Stuart had risen, and their eyes met.

"You will stay," she said, faintly; and then the door closed, and she was gone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOULD he go or stay? was the burning question in Stuart's mind all that morning. Duty and honor bade him tear himself away; yet there was something mysterious and altogether apart from the inthrallment of Margery's presence that kept him. He spent the long hours walking about the grounds with the earl, forcing himself to discuss the all-important subject of Margery's birth the while he was growing faint and weary with the struggle that raged within him.

The surprise, the sleepless night, the agitation at last began to tell; and, as the afternoon advanced, Stuart was obliged to confess that he was quite exhausted and could walk no further.

The earl was full of contrition for his thoughtlessness.

"Come back to the house. Would you prefer to go to your own room? If not, rest in my 'den.' I can answer for its silence and coziness."

Stuart preferred the "den;" the misery of the previous night haunted him—he hated the thought of his luxurious bedroom. The earl led the way to the north wing of the house, and, going to the extreme end of a corridor, pushed open the door of an apartment that seemed to warrant his statement. It was three-cornered and quaint, and at the end branched off into another room which led through a long French window to the grounds. Lord Court closed the door between the two rooms, and pushing a chair to the fire, made his guest comfortable, handing him at the same time the batch of newspapers that had just arrived from London.

"Now you are settled," he said, genially. "You look as if sleep would not come amiss; and, such being the case, I shall have no hesitation in leaving you. I must drive to Beverley Town, a good distance away; I have an important interview on hand with a troublesome tenant. I shall be back, however, before dinner. Are you sure you won't be bored?"

Stuart replied in the negative, and, after seeing him cozily ensconced, Lord Court quitted the room, and made his way to the stables.

Left to himself, Stuart leaned back wearily, and gave way to thought. Once again the struggle raged between duty and desire. The love that he had thought was treasured only for his ideal lived for the woman who had deceived him, and swept away all memory of that other girl who through all her trouble and sorrow had soothed and helped him. There was everything to call him away, yet he felt he could not go until he had gazed once more on the delicate beauty that had seemed to him the personification of truth and sweetness in the summer that was gone. There was something altogether strange and incomprehensible in Margery's marriage. The earl had casually mentioned the love that his dead sister had had for his wife, and Stuart would have followed up the remark in order to learn how it was that the village girl had become the Countess of Court; but the earl would talk of nothing but Sir Douglas Gerant and the wonderful discovery of his daughter.

Stuart took up his paper and forced himself to read; but the words seemed to run into each other, and his mind refused to be diverted from the mystery and perplexity that

tormented it. As he lay back wearily gazing into the glowing coals, he saw his duty clearly—he must leave the manor and put every barrier between Margery and himself. Vane had been true, faithful, devoted; to her he would return, and by earnestness and determination try to thrust out all remembrance of his false love from his heart, and forget that she even existed.

The struggle was ended now, he told himself; his path was clear and well defined. A sense of peace stole over him; the fire-light flickered amid the fast-growing shadows. Stuart's head drooped, his eyes closed, and his troubled spirit was soothed in slumber.

The afternoon grew into winter dusk; the fire had settled in a glowing mass of red embers, and not a sound disturbed the silence. Presently the door was opened gently, a white hand pushed aside the curtain, and Margery stood in the room. As her eyes fell on Stuart's motionless form, her heart gave one great leap, then sunk again; she let her gaze rest with unspeakable sadness and tenderness on her lost lover's face, then she turned to go. She moved away softly, and her hand was on the door, when a sound came from behind:

"Margery!"

She turned at once, to see Stuart with his hand outstretched.

"I am sorry," she faltered faintly. "I did not know you were here. I came to find my husband; I have disturbed you."

Stuart's hand fell, and he bowed his head to the arm of the chair.

"You are ill!" Margery went on quickly. "Let me—"

Stuart raised his head and rose to his feet, steadying himself with one hand on the chair.

"I was dreaming," he answered hurriedly; "but I am awake now, Lady Court."

The color faded from Margery's face.

"Your husband has gone to Beverley Town," Stuart continued, in a voice that sounded strange in his own ears. "He settled me comfortably in his own 'den' before starting, and told me that he would be home to dinner."

Margery bowed her head and turned toward the door, when Stuart moved forward as if to arrest her.

"As I shall leave you this evening," he said hurriedly,

"I will take the present opportunity of informing you that the letter and proofs I spoke of this morning shall be sent to you as soon as possible."

"You are very kind," responded Margery, as calmly as possible; "thank you for all you have done."

There was a pause. Margery felt as if some strong unknown power held her to the spot; she wished to move away, yet could not; and Stuart let his eyes rest on her fair loveliness, feeling that his resolution to depart was growing weaker and weaker as he gazed.

"I have done nothing," he said almost harshly, trying to hide his agitation.

"It is all so new and strange," murmured the girl, putting one hand to her throat and speaking as if to herself. "How often we have discussed the story of my mother, yet how far we were from the truth! And we were cousins all the time."

"What use is there in recalling the past?" asked the young man hoarsely. "It can bring nothing but pain."

Margery looked up at his pale drawn face.

"Pain," she repeated slowly. "I wonder if you know what pain I have suffered."

She spoke unconsciously, urged by the memory of all her sorrow, her girlish despair and her humiliation.

"What should give you pain?" cried Stuart harshly, folding his arms in his agitation. "You have riches, title—you can do as you will—you are Lady Court."

The bitterness of his voice went to her very heart.

"How cruel you are!" she murmured, her head dropping upon her breast.

"Cruel!" he repeated, moving to her side, mad with the intoxication of his love and the remembrance of her deceit. "Were you not cruel when you coquetted with me, led me on, lied to me, and then deceived me?"

"Deceived you! What do you mean?"

Stuart met her clear blue eyes, startled yet strangely steadfast.

"Why do you say such wicked, such cruel things of me?" she asked.

Stuart hesitated for a moment; a sudden strange fear crept into his heart.

"You may give them other names," he said huskily. "I call it deceit, I call it wickedness to act as you did—to

laugh at me, to send false tender messages the while you were fooling another man, and suddenly to leave the village for him, forgetting me and all the words you had spoken only three days before."

Margery had moved slowly to the table. She still wore the long robe of white serge that she had donned in the morning. She looked up at Stuart, mystified and pained by his words. She put one hand on the table and gazed at her old lover, whose arms were still folded across his breast.

"I do not understand," she said, distinctly yet faintly. "You accuse me of deceit."

"Let me recall the past," returned Stuart, letting his hands drop to his sides, while he moved nearer to her. "On the day we plighted our troth, the words I spoke, Margery, were from my heart, not lightly meant or lightly given, but solemn and serious; while yours—"

"While mine," she cried, raising her head proudly, "live as truly in my heart now as they did on that day! Ah, what have I said?"

She moved to a chair, and, flinging herself into it, buried her face in her hands, while he stood as he was, hardly realizing what it was that caused the sudden glow within his breast, the unspeakable happiness that possessed him. In a moment, however, Margery rose; pride had come to her aid. She looked at him steadily, her two small hands clasped.

"You have accused me of deceit," she said, "spoken words insulting to a true woman; but it is what I should have expected from the man who trampled on a girl's heart, her life, as you did on mine. Ah, how wrongly I judged you! I thought you a hero, a king; you proved yourself mean, dishonorable, despicable!"

She drew a quick breath, then went on, not noticing that his face had grown as pale as her own.

"I was only a village girl, a plaything of the hour, sufficient to amuse you when you were dull, a toy to be tossed aside when I had given you all the amusement you wanted. It was nothing to you what might come to me—I served your purpose. In my foolish ignorance I gave you all my heart; I let you see how deeply I loved you; and, in return, you went back to your cousin, your equal, and laughed at my foolish weakness as a good joke. You to

talk of deceit, of lies—you, who offered me such insults, sending me money through her—money, Stuart, when my heart was breaking!"

She paused, her hands pressed close to her heart, which beat most painfully. Stuart moved nearer to her; he put one hand on her arm.

"Insults—money!" he echoed, in a hard, quiet voice between his clinched teeth. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean the humiliation you offered me when you sent that cruel, beautiful woman, your cousin, to me, with cold, insulting words and an offer of money as a cure for all I might suffer!"

Stuart's hold tightened on her arm.

"Vane offered you insults—money!" he said, incredulously.

"Yes," replied Margery. Then, as he turned away with a groan, she added, hurriedly: "You did not send her, Stuart?"

"Send her? Great heavens! you ask me that?"

The girl drew back, frightened by the agony in his voice, and he moved to the fire-place, leaning one arm on it for support, with his face turned from her.

"Tell me what happened," he said, after a brief pause.

Margery drew a quick breath, and then, in a low, sad voice, she spoke of her sorrow at Mary Morris's death, her trouble because of his accident, her meeting with Sir Douglas Gerant, and the words he had spoken. Then she told him of Robert Bright's proposal, and of the horror and agony of Vane's visit, the result of which was that she determined to leave the village at once, and to that end sought the help of Miss Lawson. A few sad words told of Enid's death and her marriage.

Stuart never moved during the recital; his heart seemed turned to stone. He dared not think of his love—the misery of his loss maddened him; it was of the treachery and cruelty he thought; and his brain whirled at the memory.

"And you believed that of me?" he asked, almost mechanically.

"It seemed so true," murmured the girl, wistfully; then, pressing her hands together, she whispered, "And it was not?"

"It was false from beginning to end!"

Their eyes met, and a shudder passed over each. Margery felt her heart grow cold as ice, a lump rise in her throat.

"We were deceived," she said, faintly.

"Yes."

"Forgive me—oh, forgive me!" she cried. "How I have wronged you!"

Stuart clasped her hand with his own, then dropped upon his knees at her feet, and pressed his lips to her fingers.

"Forgive you!" he said, pasisonately. "It is from you forgiveness must come, my sweet, my love! I shall kneel at your feet till you have pardoned me, Margery, my darling!"

"Oh, hush!" she whispered. "Forgive you? Yes, a hundred times! Indeed, it is all forgotten now, forgotten and done with."

"Forgotten!" cried Stuart. "Ah, no!"

"We were brave in words on that day, Stuart," said Margery, gazing at the fire. "How little we guessed that the battle would begin that very moment, the fight be so long! We were so happy, and now—"

"And now," he said, hoarsely, rising to his feet, "life is ended forever! You are not free. I find you and lose you forever at the same time. What have we done that fate should be so hard, so cruel!"

Margery felt the gladness, the triumphant joy, die out of her heart, her senses grow numb and heavy; she came back from the happy past to the present, she remembered all.

"Stuart," she said, slowly and impressively, "it is too late to speak of that; we must part now, never to meet again."

"Never to meet again!" he repeated, raising his head from his hands. "Oh, no, no—that is too much! Let me see you, hear you speak. If you are taken from me now, the darkness will be too terrible. Ah, Margery, have some pity! Think of our love, our dream; do not send me from you." He seized her hands in his, and half drew her into his arms; but, as his eyes fell on her pale, troubled face, he loosed his hold, and, standing upright before her, said, rapidly, "Yes, I will go—I will go to the uttermost

parts of the earth—to death—if only you will tell me that you love me, have ever loved me, and me only!"

Margery buried her face in her hands. She was silent for a few seconds, and then she looked up.

"I am a wife, Stuart," she replied, slowly, drawing her breath as if in pain; "at the side of a death-bed I took upon me the most solemn and sacred vows. My husband is good; the depths of his nobility and generosity you could never fathom. To speak such words would be dishonorable, would be a sin. I can say no more."

Stuart's head fell forward on his breast; the soft, sad tones touched his manliness to the core.

"Forgive me!" he said, huskily. "You are right—we must part; I will leave Court Manor as soon as possible."

"It will be best."

The words fell almost coldly from her lips; her eyes were closed in pain, her face was pale and drawn. She paused an instant, then moved slowly from the fire, from the proximity of the man bowed down by his despair. She seemed almost overwhelmed by the magnitude of this new sorrow; but, though she looked so frail and delicate, she possessed unusual courage. Her pride and honor supported her in this worst of all her troubles. The future, with its bitterness, stood before her; she had to face life—

> "If that may be called life
> From which each charm of life has fled—
> Happiness gone with hope and love
> In all but breath already dead."

And brave the struggle she would, though it broke her heart.

At the door she turned. The sight of Stuart's grief struck her painfully; she held out her hand, urged by an uncontrollable impulse.

"Stuart!" she said, faintly.

He was beside her in an instant.

"If you value what I say," she whispered, as he clasped her hand, "you will be brave. Do not speak of your life as ended. We both have duties. We have been tried; but Heaven has been very good, for the clouds of doubt and suspicion that hung over our hearts have been dispelled. To know the truth is happiness and comfort—let us be grateful and not murmur. Now, good-bye."

Their eyes met, and he bent his head till his lips touched her small, cold, trembling hand.

"I will remember, cousin," he responded; "good-bye."

The curtain was moved aside, then fell back again to its place, and Stuart Crosbie was alone.

"Then came the bitter hours, and broke
Thy heart from mine away,
And tearfully the words we spoke
We were so loath to say.
Farewell, farewell, world so fair!
Farewell, joy of soul!

"Farewell. We shall not meet again
As we are parting now;
I must my beating heart restrain,
Must veil my burning brow.
Oh, those are tears of bitterness
Wrung from the beating heart,
When two, blest in their tenderness,
Must learn to live apart!"

* * * * *

Stuart stood by the fire alone, heedless that the embers were slowly dying, heedless of the dusk that filled the room, heedless of all save his burden of misery. He was too weak to grapple with his sorrow—too prostrate, from the freshness and poignancy of his grief, to overcome it. At last he roused himself; he had to act, not think. He raised his head, looked round in a dazed, troubled way, and, with a weary step, went slowly from the room.

As the sound of his footsteps died away, the door of the inner room was opened and a man approached the fire—a man from whose face all joy and happiness had fled, in whose dark eyes a world of speechless agony glowed, round whose mouth dwelt the desolation of hopelessness. He stood erect for an instant, then with a deep groan buried his face in his hands and sunk into a chair.

It was Margery's husband—Nugent, Earl of Court.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BLUSTERING March had come round, and gossip had worn to a thread the story of Lady Court's romantic birth. It had seized on the history of Sir Douglas Gerant's long-

lost daughter with avidity, for it was not often that society's jaded appetite was regaled with so delightful a morsel. Many things had happened since dull November, but foremost among them were two events—Lord and Lady Court were abroad, to the great annoyance of society, as it was thus debarred from beholding her ladyship in person, and the engagement between Stuart Crosbie, heir to Crosbie Castle, and Miss Vane Charteris, his cousin, came to an abrupt and strange termination just as the congratulations were pouring in. Many reasons were given in strict confidence for this unsatisfactory affair. It was averred that Miss Charteris had quarreled with her aunt, Mrs. Crosbie, and that Stuart, like a dutiful son, had espoused his mother's cause: that cold, beautiful Vane refused to become her cousin's wife when she discovered that Beecham Park had passed away from him; and that Miss Charteris had grown tired of her affianced husband. These and numerous other explanations were whispered; but no one knew the truth—none but three people—the cousins themselves and the mistress of Crosbie Castle.

Stuart had not reproached his mother; but his mental suffering caused her much uneasiness and genuine shame. She never knew what took place between Vane Charteris and her son, for Stuart was silent, and her niece left town with her mother for Cannes immediately after the rupture. She felt that Vane must be suffering disappointment, but she could never guess the humiliation, the sullen revenge and anger that were gnawing at her niece's heart. Go where she would, at every turn Vane had Stuart's contemptuous face before her, heard his bitter words, saw herself again as he had shown her, in her true light, dishonorable and despicable. That the marriage should have been broken off was acute disappointment; but the odium she had brought on herself in his eyes was even harder to bear. The malicious spite she had felt toward Margery deepened now into actual hatred; it galled her to desperation to know that the village girl should have become so great a person, her equal in birth, her superior by marriage. Poor Lady Charteris was overwhelmed with sorrow at the abrupt termination of her daughter's engagement, and fretted herself to a shadow because of Vane's irritability and peevishness. She lavished all her heart's tenderness on her daughter, hoping and trusting to see her regain her spirits;

but it was weary work. Vane, crushed by her own deceit and wrong-doing, was rapidly changing into an envious, soured, miserable woman.

Mrs. Crosbie was ignorant of the whole of Vane's cruel falsehoods and insults; and, knowing this, Stuart accepted as truly genuine her proud words of sorrow and vexation for her share in the matter. It had been a startling disclosure to Mrs. Crosbie when she found that Margery Daw had become the Countess of Court; but, when surprise had died away, she felt unconsciously gratified that her new relative should hold so high a social position, and was even disposed to be friendly toward her, although she had deprived Stuart of Beecham Park. She wrote a courteous note to the young wife when her excitement had cooled, welcoming her as her kinswoman, and offering her warm congratulations.

Margery was in Rome when this letter reached her. She read it through slowly, then, with a faint smile, folded it and put it away. It was not in keeping with her generous nature to bear malice, so she replied to Mrs. Crosbie's epistle with a few words of acknowledgment written in a kindly spirit. Margery received another letter at about the same time which brought a flush of sincere pleasure to her face. It was written by Miss Lawson in the name of the villagers of Hurstley, offering Lady Court warm expressions of affection, respect, and esteem from all her old friends, and at the head of the list of names were the signatures of Farmer Bright and his wife; Miss Lawson's own letter explained everything. Just after the news of Margery's parentage was made public to the village, a letter came from Robert Bright in Australia, from which his mother gathered how unjustly she had wronged Margery in her hasty suspicions; and, eager to make atonement, the good woman had headed the village letter with her name. Robert spoke of returning almost immediately, so Margery's heart was lighter on that score. Miss Lawson's words of joy at her dear child's prosperity and happiness brought tears to Margery's eyes; but they were tears of gratitude and affection, not of pain.

She was strangely peaceful and content now; the memory of Stuart's supposed deception and insults, which had rankled so long in her breast, was gone; she remembered only that his love for her had never faltered. Her girlhood

was buried in her short love-dream; she was a woman now, brave and determined to fight the battle of life gallantly to the end. She looked to her husband as a guide and a comforter and he tended her with more than a husband's care. A great true affection had sprung up in her heart for him; he was so tender, so good, so manly! In her gratitude for all his thought and care she vowed always to keep a smile for him, while the secret of her love should be locked from his sight forever. Sometimes she would sink into a reverie, then wake, to find his eyes fixed on her with such intensity, such an agony of love and pain in them, that it would startle her; but as she looked the expression would fade and the smile would come, the tender grave smile that she knew so well. When Mrs. Crosbie's second letter came, begging the earl and countess to pay her a visit, it was he who replied; and, as if divining her secret thoughts, he wrote that his wife regretted she was unable to visit Crosbie Castle at present.

They had left the Manor almost immediately after Stuart's departure. Lord Court suggested a short tour on the Continent, and Margery eagerly agreed; so they crossed the Channel without delay. But, as the winter slipped away, it occurred to Margery that she should visit her inheritance, Beecham Park. So, bidding farewell to the clear blue skies and the world of delights that had been opened to her, they returned to England.

Beecham Park was a huge gloomy mansion, so deserted and solitary-looking that, as they drove up the magnificent avenue of chestnuts, Margery involuntarily shuddered. Sir Eustace Gerant had neglected the estate; and, splendid though the building was within, it did not bring the pleasure to its owner that Court Manor had.

"Are you disappointed, my darling?" asked the earl one morning, after watching her carefully.

"It is very grand; the grounds and woods are beautiful; but it is not home," she answered, with a sigh.

However, there was much to be done—for they found that the steward, who had had sole control of the estate, had neglected his duties most disgracefully—so, placing all authority in the hands of her husband, Margery turned her attention to the village near, burying all regrets and vain hopes that assailed her in untiring work on behalf of her tenants.

It was a weary trial at times, for, though she had courage, her strength would occasionally fail, and her heart would yearn for the love she had lost; but none knew of this struggle but herself—she had learned to control her emotions and smile when the burden was heaviest.

"'Tis strange with how much power and pride
The softness is of love allied,
How much of power to force the breast
To be in outward show at rest,
How much of pride that never eye
May look upon its agony.
Ah, little will the lip reveal
Of all the burning heart can feel!"

Of Stuart she heard nothing; but she had faith in his courage and manliness, and knew that, once the cloud which overshadowed him had passed, he would fulfill his word and face the world. He was once more her ideal, her hero, and she felt he would not fail in this duty to himself.

Engrossed in her thoughts and daily tasks, she did not notice the change that seemed to be coming over the earl. His tenderness never failed, his courtesy and love were never lacking, and she had grown so used to all his thoughtful care that it seemed but the adjunct of every-day life. But she was suddenly awakened from this existence.

The Squire of Crosbie Castle had been one of the first among her new relatives warmly to welcome Margery. He had loved her father, and for his old affection's sake had opened his heart to the young girl; when therefore he learned that the Earl and Countess of Court had returned to England and were staying at Beecham Park, he wrote immediately, expressing a great wish to visit them. To this Margery and her husband replied with genuine pleasure, begging the squire to come as soon as possible.

Margery found a warm love spring up in her breast for Stuart's father, and the earl and the squire soon became good friends. It was the squire who called Margery's attention to Lord Court's quiet manner and worn appearance, as they were talking together one morning. Margery listened with a sense of regret and remorse at her blindness, and, making some excuse, she left the squire in the grounds where they had been sauntering and hurried back to the house. It was a glorious spring day; the sunshine illuminated the old mansion, darting in golden shafts

through the long narrow windows. Margery crossed the hall, above which was seen a massive dome and round which ran the gallery leading to the upper apartments and bedrooms. Several servants were hurrying to and fro; and, asking for the earl, she learned that he was in the study, busy with the new steward.

Without hesitation she made her way to the room and opened the door. The earl was alone, leaning his head upon his hand, reading some papers which lay on the table.

"This lease is wrong, Robins," he said, not looking up as the door opened.

Margery moved forward softly, and then knelt at his feet.

"Nugent!" she said, with a little catch in her breath as she noted his pale worn face for the first time.

The earl turned with a smile so sweet and tender that it made Margery's lips tremble.

"My darling!" he exclaimed, gently. "You here?"

"Nugent, you are ill—worried! Ah, I have been blind not to see it before! Oh, forgive me, forgive me!"

Lord Court raised her head tenderly.

"Why, Margery," he said, lightly, "what is the matter? Who has been frightening you?"

"I am nervous about you; you look so worn and ill. Nugent, you must put away those deeds and writings. They distress me."

"You shall not be distressed then, my darling; see—I have put them away at once. But you are mistaken, Margery; I am not ill, only a little tired."

"Tired?" she repeated, putting her hands on his. "Yes, yes, of course! How forgetful I am! I leave you all this tiresome business to do. I am very selfish."

"You are my dear, sweet Margery!" he said, lightly. "But what has caused you this sudden fear, my darling?"

"You have been looking ill for so long! The squire has just spoken to me, and it has frightened me: and, Nugent, I want to ask you something. Will you promise to do it?"

"What can I refuse you, Margery?"

"Then let us leave here and go back to the manor—the squire is longing to see our dear old home. You will come, dear?"

"Home!" repeated the earl, dreamily, as if the word

brought content. Then, with a sudden contraction of his brows, as if from pain, he added, "But it will be lonely for you, my dear one; you will not care for it."

"I wish it with all my heart," said Margery, quietly, glad to see that this proposal brought a gleam of pleasure to his eyes.

"Then," returned her husband, looking with a strange, sad steadfastness into her glorious eyes—"then we will go home, Margery."

CHAPTER XXIX.

BACK at Court Manor, Margery banished for awhile the sad memory of her lost love. This spot was hallowed by the presence of Enid's spirit, and for that reason, apart from all others, was dear to her. The squire reveled in the picturesque surroundings of the estate.

"They may call Beecham magnificent," he said, dreamily as he stood in the old-fashioned gardens and gazed round on the fragrant flowers, "but this is home."

"Cousin Sholto, you indorse my opinion. I love the manor!"

Margery, clad in a long robe of creamy white, with just a knot of black ribbons at her neck and in her broad-brimmed hat, glanced at her husband as she spoke, and smiled at him.

The squire responded to his hostess by a poetical quotation:

> "'And primroses, pale gems of spring,
> Lay on the green turf glistening
> Close by the violet, whose breath
> Is so sweet, in a dewy wreath.
> And, oh, that myrtle—how green it grew,
> With flowers as white as the pearls of dew
> That shone beside! And the glorious rose
> Lay like a beauty in warm repose,
> Blushing in slumber.'"

Margery listened dreamily. Her thoughts had flown to the spring-time of her life, recalled by the breath of the flowers, the sweetness of the air.

The earl had wandered across the lawn; and, though he looked less grave and worn, the expression of his eyes as he turned from Margery was unspeakably sad.

Margery's reverie was disturbed by the squire, and she was soon deep in an interesting scientific discussion with him. Presently her husband returned, followed by one of the gardeners.

"I am going to the west part of the grounds, my darling," he said. "Marshall tells me the men are going to cut down that dead tree this morning. It was struck by lightning in the autumn."

"I will come with you, Court," broke in the squire. "In my young days I was rather good at that sort of thing."

"Come, by all means. Marshall, see that there are two extra axes ready."

"You are not going to help them, are you, Nugent?" Margery asked, quickly and nervously.

"Yes, my darling. But don't be afraid; I am, as school-boys would say, a 'big gun' at wood-cutting—am I not, Marshall?"

"Indeed you are, my lord," the gardener replied, solemnly.

"May I come and watch you?"

The earl hesitated.

"I should be afraid, darling, as the splinters fly about so rapidly; but perhaps I can place you in a safe corner. Run and put on some stronger shoes; the ground is damp down at that corner. You have good ropes, Marshall?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I will follow you directly," said Margery; then, as they turned, urged by an uncontrollable impulse, she called, "Nugent!"

The earl came back at once.

"You are sure there is no danger?"

"Quite sure—as certain as any man can be."

Margery smiled, raised her lips to his, and he kissed her. A faint flush rose to his brow at the simple action; and then, with a swift, tender look, he turned and walked rapidly away.

Margery went quickly to the house and changed her shoes for a stronger pair; then, seeing the look of eagerness on Pauline's face she good-naturedly told the maid to put on a hat, and they started together.

The sound of voices and heavy blows led them to the exact spot, and Pauline in her excitement could not repress

little shrieks and exclamations of astonishment. As they turned the corner the earl came toward them; he had removed his coat, and, with his strong right hand grasping the ax, his face flushed from the unwonted exercise, he looked almost handsome.

"Come here, my darling," he said, leading Margery to a safe nook. "Crosbie, stand by my wife. We shall soon have it down, poor old tree! How well I remember it in my school-boy days! You are frightened, Margery!"

"No," she answered with a smile, though her heart thrilled with strange apprehension.

The squire came to her, looking rather despondent.

"I find that years have greatly lessened my strength," he remarked, with a little sigh, "and I must look on now."

Margery did not answer; she was watching her husband. She heard his clear ringing voice directing the men, saw his straight even strokes, and the excitement overcame her dread. It was a novel scene, and one that pleased her, though the sight of the gray dead trunk, the remains of a noble flourishing tree, saddened her somewhat. Pauline cowered and shrieked as she heard the great rough mass creak; but Margery never moved; the bustle and vigor of the men roused her spirit—she almost longed to assist. The earl, glancing now and then at the group of watchers, caught the gleam of her eyes, and, smiling, he waved his hand toward the girlish figure that looked so fair and graceful in its white robes against the background of young trees and bushes.

"It was not such a tough job as it looked," observed the squire, as he watched the men throw stout ropes round the great trunk and knot them firmly, preparatory to dragging the tree to earth.

Margery nodded her head absently; she was lost in the excitement of the moment. She saw the earl wave them further back toward the bushes, felt Pauline drew her on one side, though her eyes never left her husband's form, and then came a moment of silence. Suddenly a mighty crash sounded in her ears, while a cloud of dust obscured her vision.

"Is it all over?" she asked vaguely, turning to the squire; but her cousin had left her side and was hurrying to the group of men.

"Miladi will return?" queried Pauline, with a little shudder. "Ah, what terrible noise!"

"I will wait for Lord Court," answered Margery; then, after a little pause—"But, Pauline, what is the matter? Some one is hurt!"

"They crowd together—that is all, miladi. Shall I go and see?"

"No; I will."

Drawing her skirts together, Margery left her retreat and approached the group. As the men looked round and perceived her, she thought they seemed alarmed and pained. She quickened her steps, and then the squire came toward her.

"You must let me take you to the house, my dear," he said hurriedly; "your husband wishes it."

"What is the matter? Some one is hurt! Cousin Sholto, don't stop me! I know now—it is Nugent!"

She pushed the squire's trembling hand on one side, and with swift steps approached the group. The men fell back in silence, and in an instant she was on her knees beside a silent prostrate form with face of deathly hue.

"Nugent!" she cried, bending over him in agony. Then, as he still lay perfectly still, she looked round wildly. "What is it? Fetch a doctor quickly—your master is hurt!"

The man Marshall stepped forward.

"We've sent for the doctor, my lady. It was done in an instant; the tree swerved and brought his lordship down with it. We've just dragged it off his body. He were sensible at first, and asked us to keep you away; but he's fainted now."

Margery scarcely heard the explanation; with a heart full of dread she was bending over the pale face, breathing words of agony and tenderness that fell on silent ears. The squire came to her and tried to draw her away; but she would not stir. They brought brandy from the house, and a mattress with pillows on which to carry the injured man; but all were afraid to touch him. Then, when her misery, her despair, was greatest, the heavy lids were raised, and she met the gaze of the deep dark eyes. The white lips trembled and moved; she bent her head to catch the whisper.

"It—is—nothing—my darling. Take me to—"

The labored speech died away in another faint; and, as she saw his weakness and suffering, Margery rose to her feet with courage born of despair.

"Carry your master to the house," she said steadily, never taking her eyes from his face.

The men stooped, and with tender, gentle hands lifted the inanimate form on to the mattress, then, with slow, even steps, they carried him through the sunlit gardens to the house. It was not far; yet by the time they reached the entrance the doctor of the village was seen riding furiously up the avenue. He leaped from his horse, and was at the wounded man's side in an instant. Margery turned her eyes from the pale face of her husband and fixed them upon the doctor. As he scanned the earl's drawn countenance, her heart seemed to stand still. In that moment she was conscious of nothing but an agony of dread, remorse, and pain, so terrible that it almost overpowered her.

"Carry him into a room on the ground-floor," said the doctor decisively; "we must not risk the stairs."

They carried him through the hall into the room where long before he had sat by Enid's couch. Margery walked with them, though what power enabled her to move she knew not, for all life seemed dead within her.

The men withdrew quietly to the door-way, while she crouched down by the still form and buried her face in her hands. The squire and the doctor exchanged glances.

"Get her away!" murmured the latter. But Margery heard him.

"No, no!" she protested, rising to her feet. "Let me stay—I will be brave, Cousin Sholto. You will let me stay—you must let me stay; I can not go!"

"Doctor Godfrey will let you remain if you have the strength," the squire said, soothingly; then he took her two cold hands in his and drew her to the wide window, while the doctor motioned the men away and closed the door.

Margery's eyes never left the pallid face of her husband. In breathless, sickening anxiety she watched Dr. Godfrey pass his hand over the injured man's chest and fractured arm, unconscious that the broken respirations that came from her lips told of the agony she was enduring. The

doctor looked round as the sound fell on his ears, and in an instant he knew how to act.

"Lady Court, I want you to help me," he said, gravely, advancing to her. "Go at once, and fetch me brandy, some warm water, a sponge, and some old linen—as quickly as possible, please."

In a moment she had turned and left the room. The squire glanced at the doctor.

"It was to get her away," explained the medical man. "The case is hopeless; I can do nothing. The ribs are terribly crushed, the lungs and heart vitally injured, and there is a severe fracture of the left shoulder and arm. It is only a question of hours now—perhaps minutes; but it will do her good to give her occupation. That tension of her nerves was killing her, poor young creature!"

"I can do no good?" queried the squire, passing a trembling hand across his brow.

"No," answered Dr. Godfrey. "Let me advise you to go to your room; when the change comes you shall know."

The squire went away, feeling now more than ever that he was indeed a weak old man. The doctor was alone and bending over the patient when Margery came back, carrying all that he had asked for. She stood as silent as a statue while he slowly poured a few drops of brandy between the closed lips; then, as a sign of life came once more into the death-like face, she gave a sob of thankfulness and sunk upon her knees by the couch.

The earl's eyelids were raised with difficulty, and his dark eyes wandered round slowly till they rested on his wife's face, then the faintest of smiles broke over his countenance, dying away the next instant in a contraction of pain.

"Nugent—Nugent—oh, speak to me!" whispered Margery, wildly, putting her trembling lips to his passive hand, all the goodness, the generosity, the tenderness that this man had lavished upon her coming back to her memory and maddening her.

Dr. Godfrey moistened the earl's lips again; the breath came from the injured chest in short, broken respirations; and then, as dew to a parched flower, as golden light in direst darkness, fell the whisper of her husband's voice on Margery's ears. He looked at the doctor, then said, with difficulty:

"Leave us—alone."

Dr. Godfrey rose, and turned to Margery.

"Do not agitate him," he said, gently. "He has something to tell you, I see. Moisten his lips with brandy if he grows faint. I will go out on to the terrace; I shall be close at hand if you want me."

The earl's eyes followed him; then they came back to Margery. He tried to raise his hand to her head, but the effort was too much; it fell nerveless to his side.

"My darling—my wife! You are sorry, then?" he gasped.

"Sorry!" whispered Margery, her voice thick with agony. "Oh, that I could give my life for yours, Nugent—that I could spare you all!" She could say no more.

The earl moved his head a little, his eyes closed; she put the brandy to his lips.

"It has come at last!" he murmured. "Margery, listen, my darling! I know your secret, your love-story." He wrestled for a moment with his growing faintness then went on, brokenly: "I was in my room that day when you parted from Stuart, and I heard all, my brave darling—learned how much you were suffering. My death will set you free. You will be happy in the future, Margery, my sweet one!"

"Do not—oh, do not speak like that, Nugent!" she whispered, mad with a fever of pain, regret, remorse. "You torture me!"

"Let me tell you how happy you have made me, wife. Death is near—you must—" His voice sunk; then, with a last effort, he went on: "Promise to make Stuart happy; he loves you, Margery. Give me your promise—"

"I can not," she broke in, in tearless agony. "Nugent, you break my heart—you—" Then seeing the intense eagerness of his dark eyes, she paused.

"Promise!" his lips formed rather than spoke.

She hesitated only for a moment.

"I promise," she murmured, faintly.

A smile lighted up his face.

"Now all is ended!" The words came very faintly. "I am content. Kiss me, my—"

Margery put her lips to his—their coldness filled her with dread. A sigh came from the earl's injured breast, his eyes closed.

"Nugent, I promise!" she murmured, wildly. "But you will not go—you will not leave me! I want you; you must stay! Nugent, open your eyes—speak to me—husband!"

She bent over him again, and as she did so a gentle hand was placed on her shoulder, and she was raised from her knees. She saw the still pallid face, calm and passive in the sunlight; then a great blackness came over her, and she knew no more.

CHAPTER XXX.

"MARGERY, the sea is beautiful to-day. Come out, child; it will do you good."

Miss Lawson spoke in her old abrupt, almost stern way; but she experienced deep, heartfelt pain as she looked at the slight form in its heavy mourning-robe, and at the girlish, beautiful face beneath the widow's cap.

Margery raised her eyes from her writing.

"I do not care for it, dear," she answered, gently; "and I must finish these letters for the post. Remember, Wavemouth is not London; we do not go by steam down here."

"Your letters can wait," said Miss Lawson. "They are not of such consequence as your health."

"My tenants at Beecham do not say that," returned Lady Court, with a faint smile; "but, if you wish it very—"

"I do wish it very much; indeed, I am rather dull, Margery."

The well-assumed plaintiveness of the elder woman's last words was most successful.

"Dull!" repeated Margery, putting down her pen at once. "Oh, forgive me! How selfish I am, dear friend!"

"There, don't waste time in self-reproach! Go and put on your hat—not your heavy bonnet. The fresh air will do you more good than sentimentalizing."

Miss Lawson brushed away a tear as the slender figure left the room. A year had gone—a sharp and trying spring, a summer of golden splendor, an autumn of cheerless misery, a winter of frost and chill, and spring was come again; and during all that time Margery had lived weighed down by a burden of anguish and sorrow. Miss Lawson had gone to her at the beginning of her grief, and, discard-

ing all other ties, had given herself up to her old pupil, who clung to her so despairingly; and it was the elder woman's one aim to drive the gloom and despondency from the girlish brow, and bring joy and happiness back to the youthful heart.

She knew Margery's secret now. Stuart and she were leagued together; but all through the year, though she had tried again and again, she could not bring the lovers and cousins together. Margery shrunk from meeting Stuart —shrunk with a heart full of remorse, pain, and morbid gloom. Was it right that she should be glad, have happiness, when one who had loved her so truly and tenderly lay in the grave forgotten? Once, only once, had she spoken on this subject to Miss Lawson; and, like a wise woman, the governess said nothing, but decided to wait.

"It is but natural, after all. Margery's sensitive, generous spirit has received so terrible a shock, that it has shattered all joy in life at one blow."

So spoke Miss Lawson as she reasoned with Stuart, who hungered for a kind word, a sign, from his early love. He honored her for her fealty to the dead, but he was human, and his heart cried out for peace after so much misery. He had been more than touched by the noble, generous thoughtfulness of the dying man; for, after all was over and the will read, a letter was sent him, and, alone in his chamber, Stuart learned the wish and desire of Nugent, Earl of Court.

The writer told how, on returning earlier than he had anticipated, he had entered the house through the window of his "den," from the grounds. This was barred after him by his servant; and thus he became an unintentional eavesdropper to the sad meeting between his wife and her cousin; and he ended by entreating Stuart to let no obstacle stand in his path, but to consummate Margery's and his own happiness by a speedy marriage.

With the letter of the dead man close to his heart, Stuart buried all compunction and regret, and waited and longed for Margery to speak; but she was silent. She was racked by conflicting emotions. Day and night the image of her dead husband hardly left her mind; for evidence of his great love still surrounded her, Court Manor being her own house, bequeathed to her when the rest of the estate passed to the next heir. She could not banish the regret

and remorse that had seized her. Again and again she longed for the past to return, so that she might act differently. And yet her love for Stuart had not grown less; he was still her hero, her king. It was doubt and nervous, sensitive pain that kept her from him; and day by day the pain grew greater, till she knew not what to do.

Had she been allowed, Margery would have remained at Court Manor, in spite of the sad memories that clung to it; but Miss Lawson took care not to sanction such an arrangement. She dictated to the young Countess of Court as she had dictated in the old days to Margery Daw; and unconsciously the girlish widow obeyed, as she had always done, and allowed her friend to rule. They had spent the first six months following the earl's death at Beecham Park, then Miss Lawson took Margery abroad before paying a brief visit to the manor. Now she accompanied Lady Court to Wavemouth, at Margery's own request. Personally, she thought the little village too quiet for the girl, but Margery seemed to like its peaceful monotony, so she raised no objection. As time went on, however, and she found the sad apathy increase, instead of decrease, the governess began to consider how she ought to act.

Stuart had not been mentioned between them for weeks, though Miss Lawson had to send a daily report to the eager, anxious man. Something must be done, she declared mentally, as she turned to meet Margery entering the room in her heavy black robe and large black hat, to banish the morbid remorse and sadness that were preying upon the life of the young girl.

"I am glad to see you are sensible," she observed, nodding at sight of the hat. "Now come along; it is a beautiful afternoon."

Margery smiled faintly at the sharp words yet gentle voice, and together they left the house.

They walked on in silence to the very edge of the sea, and stood watching the sunlit crested waves come rolling in. Margery was deep in thought, and Miss Lawson watched her anxiously. Her heart prompted her to speak out, to urge the girl to cast off her burden of gloom and turn once more to joy and happiness, but the sad young face looking across the sea stopped her.

The afternoon sun descended lower and lower, and still Margery stood gazing at the sea.

"The great sea, faultless as a flow'r,
Throbs trembling under beam and breeze
And laughs with love of th' am'rous hour."

At last, as a gray cloud obscured the golden light for a time, she turned to Miss Lawson.

"Let us go back," she said, hurriedly, with a little shudder. "I am tired now."

Miss Lawson walked with her in silence.

"I am an old woman," she mused to herself, "this is beyond me. We have waited long and wearily, and yet she gets no better. I shall give in, and leave the rest to Stuart."

* * * * * * *

A message sped swiftly from the fishing-village to the great city. It was short, yet it brought a thrill of intense joy to Stuart Crosbie's aching heart. There was no hope breathed in the words, but hope lived within his breast, as it had lived through all his weary waiting. He longed impatiently for the night to be gone—for the morning to come, and when the sun rose over the still sleeping city, he was speeding away from it to the sea.

"Where shall we land you, sweet?
On fields of strange men's feet,
Or fields near home,
Or where the fire-flow'rs blow,
Or where the flow'rs of snow,
Or flow'rs of foam?
We are in love's hand to-day."

So sung his heart in glad anticipation of its joy. Happiness had been so long absent, it must come now. Misery, despair, sorrow, were all forgotten—he lived again!

* * * * * *

"You will be back to-night?" asked Margery, as she put a water-proof round Miss Lawson's form. "You promise me?"

"I promise," said Miss Lawson, briskly. "Ugh, what a day! Margery, take my advice; don't go out."

"It will not hurt me; I like the wind and the spray."

"Then wrap up well. Pauline"—turning to the maid—"if her ladyship does go out, see that she puts on something sensible."

"How little you trust me!" said Margery, with a faint smile. "But are you sensibly clad, may I ask?"

"Two shawls, a water-proof, goloshes, and an umbrella," observed Miss Lawson, quietly. Inwardly she felt a thrill of satisfaction; Margery seemed brighter, more natural, more her old self to-day.

"Then good-bye, dear." Margery put her lips to the elder woman's. "Give my love to Mrs Fothergill and the doctor."

Miss Lawson nodded and walked away.

"I am an old fool," she declared, savagely, to herself, as she felt a tear roll down her cheek, "and I only hope I shall keep out of the way for some good!"

Left alone, Margery stood for awhile at the window, gazing at the rough, angry sea; then she asked Pauline for her cloak and hat.

"Will miladi that I go with her?" asked the maid, in her broken English.

Margery shook her head.

"I shall not go far; and this wind does you no good, Pauline."

"Miladi is so kind. If she will permit, I think that hat will not be wise. See this *capuchon*—so warm! It will be best."

Margery agreed, and tied the comfortable hood round her delicate, lovely face, looking sweetly fair with her halo of red-gold curls and her deep, lustrous blue eyes. She turned toward the shore; the roaring and dashing of the sea exhilarated her, the strong, soft wind seemed to blow away the clouds of doubt and pain that hung over her. Her sorrow was lost in the pleasurable excitement that thrilled her as she stood, wind-blown and rain-drenched, and watched the great waves come rolling in, with their thunderous voices and mountains of spray. The tempest seemed to suit her humor; she reveled in the freedom and wildness of the elements as in the birth of a new life—a life with hope springing glorious within.

She moved on as quickly as the wind would allow, stopping every now and then to gather her cloak closer around her. The gale had blown her curls in rough fashion all over her hood; there was a light in her eyes, a glow of color on her fair cheeks; for the moment she looked the Margery of old, not the sad girl-widow of present days.

Few of the fisher-folk were about; but in the distance she could see some children running to and fro on the shore, and the wind now and then wafted their voices to her ears. Tired at last, her breath almost spent, she turned inland in a cross direction, determining to rest at one of the cottages before going home. The wind blew her along at times, almost taking her off her feet; and she had to drop upon the wet beach more than once to gather strength. At last she sighted the cottages, and struggled to the first one. The women knew her well; she was a great favorite, and they were never tired of dwelling on her youth, beauty, sad history, and goodness and generosity.

She knocked at the rough door, and it was opened immediately.

"May I come in and rest, Mrs. David?" she asked, leaning back against the door-post, almost breathless.

"Lor' bless me, my lady, in course! Come in at once!" exclaimed the buxom fisherwoman. "It is a sight too wild for you to be out. It is rough here, too, my lady. The chair is hard; but—"

"It is most acceptable," sighed Margery, sinking, with a sigh of fatigue, into the great wooden chair. "I have been walking along the shore. How rough the sea is to-day! And how have you been, Mrs. David? You look sad—are you in trouble? Oh"—catching sight of a small form covered with blankets lying in a warm corner by the fire—"your child is ill?"

Mrs. David put her apron to her eyes.

"He is better now, my lady," she replied, with a sob in her voice; "but he was all but gone this morning. Oh, dear me, it fair broke my heart to see him—him, my only one, my lady!"

"What happened?" asked Margery quickly, her heart full of sympathy. She knew the child well—a beautiful rosy-cheeked boy, the very light and joy of his parents' life. "Is he very ill?"

"He went out the morning, your ladyship. My mind misgive me as I saw him go; but he loves the sea. My man is away over to the town to-day; and Jim he begged to go out and watch the waves; and he went too near, my lady, and got drawed in by the tide, and would have been washed away if a strange gentleman—Heaven bless him!—hadn't

tore off his coat and plunged in. I thought my Jim was dead when I see him carried in white and all dripping; but the gentleman he rubbed him, and rolled him in blankets. And now he's sleeping like a lamb, you see, my lady. But, oh, I nearly died!"

"It was dreadful!" said Margery gently, rising and putting her soft white hand on the rough tanned arm of the mother. "But don't cry, Mrs. David. Jim is all right now, poor little fellow. You are nervous and upset. Can you send up to my house this evening? I will have some nice things put together for him that will soon make him well."

"Heaven bless you for your goodness, my lady!" returned Mrs. David. "I ain't one to give way to tears often; but you can understand—"

"Yes, I understand," whispered Margery, standing and looking down at the sleeping child, while Mrs. David went on with her account of the accident.

"It were just the merest chance the gentleman were on the spot," she said. "He'd come from the town, and was walking to Wavemouth, along the shore, when he saw little Jim washed off his feet, and he was in the water in an instant."

"He was brave!" Margery interjected quietly.

"Ay, that he was; and it'll never be forgotten by us, though we live to hundreds! But won't you sit down, my lady? I expects the gentleman here every minute to inquire after Jim."

"I am rested now, and I think I will make a start."

Margery walked to the little window and looked out. The wind was raging just as fiercely as ever, and the rain was beating furiously against the panes.

"Let me give you some tea, my lady," urged Mrs. David. "I'll have it ready in an instant."

Margery shook her head.

"No, thank you, Mrs. David; I must be gone. I will—"

A sharp knock came at the door, and for some strange reason she moved round so that nothing could be seen but her back, draped in the hood and cloak, while Mrs. David bustled to the door.

"It is you, sir! Come in and welcome! He's sleeping sound now, sir. Ah, Heaven give you happiness, as you have given it to me to-day!"

A curious sensation stole over Margery's heart—a sensation that brought a vague touch of joy. The next moment the joy increased, for a voice spoke, the tones of which recalled all the golden dream of her early love.

It was Stuart, her lover! Her hands, clasped together, were pressed against her throbbing heart, her lips murmured his name silently; but still she stood motionless; and Stuart's eye went from the unknown woman in the hood and cloak to the child.

"He's all right now, Mrs. David; there is no fever. You will have him as jolly as ever in a day or two."

"Oh, thank you, sir! And you yourself, sir—you ain't got no harm?"

"Not a bit," laughed Stuart cheerily. "Sea-water does not hurt me; I am used to it. I have been in a gale or two at sea, you know. It is rough weather, though, to-day, Mrs. David."

"That it is, sir. Here's her ladyship, sir, quite done up by the wind. She's honored me with resting awhile."

Stuart stared. How blind he had been! How could he have overlooked that slender figure? His heart burned within his breast, he could hardly restrain his joy. And Margery? In a moment her doubts, her sad misgivings vanished; she knew that her love lived again in all its strength and sweetness. It had been clouded, not overcome. She moved from the window and put out her hand.

"I know this gentleman, Mrs. David," she said steadily, though her limbs were trembling. "He is my cousin."

"Your ladyship's cousin?" exclaimed the woman, in surprise. "Oh, sir, that brings you closer to my heart! I've told my lady all about it."

"How brave you were!" murmured Margery, as she drew her hand from Stuart's firm clasp.

"Brave! I did nothing. But come, cousin—you ought to be going. Shall I see you home? Will you let me?"

"If you please."

Margery bent and kissed the child softly, then put out her hand to Mrs. David.

"I will come to-morrow and see how he is. Don't forget to send to-night."

"I will not, thank you again and again, my lady!"

Margery smiled, and walked to the door. The small homely room seemed suddenly illumined by a strange mys-

terious light, golden and strong as the sun. Stuart drew the door after them, then put out his hand without a word, and Margery placed her own in his.

He led her from the cottage to a sheltered spot, and then stood looking down at her with eyes that shone like stars in the passion of his love.

"Margery," he said quietly, "I have come to you. Have you no word of hope for me?"

She stood silent for an instant, then raised her love-lit eyes to his.

"One word," she whispered—"stay!"

"My darling, my own, my own forever, it has come at last!"

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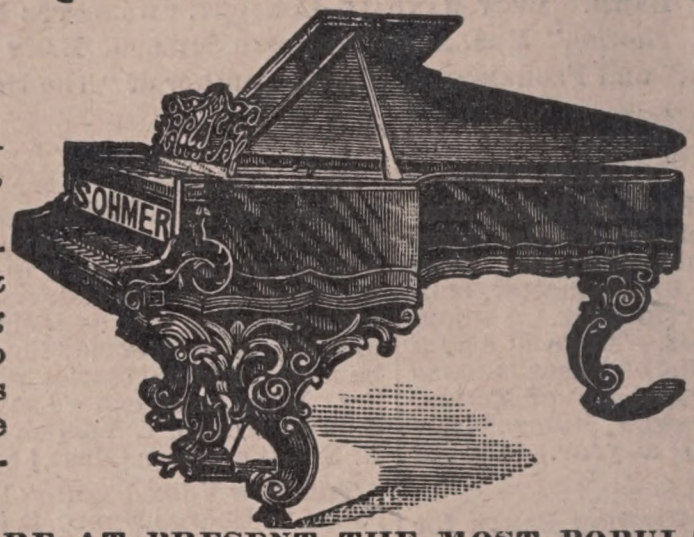

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